

Musical Missionary

NY composer Roumain shares his talents at ASU

Richard Nilsen

For composer Daniel Bernard Roumain, music is more than just notes. It's about people.

"Classical music is community. That's where it begins," he says.

It's his commitment to the social power of music that brought him to Arizona State University two years ago as composer-in-residence at ASU Public Events. He is here to spread the gospel of music.

Roumain will share the stage with his mentor, Philip Glass, Saturday at Gammage Auditorium.

"He has amazing energy," Michael Reed, director of cultural participation and programming with ASU Public Events, said of Roumain. "He has great enthusiasm and it's sincere."

Indeed, talking to Roumain, one sometimes needs to be reminded that the composer means every word he says, because he can sound more like an evangelist than a musician. He weaves his words, he cajoles, he testifies.

"It's missionary work," Roumain said. "It's social work. That is what it is for me."

His position at ASU calls for him to bring music - and the university - into neighborhoods and communities that are not normally part of the university scope. It's a job to which Roumain seems born.

"Western classical music has roots in the notion of saving lives, of changing people," he said. "It's a noble proposition."

It's a belief he comes to through personal experience. Playing violin and composing music, he says, have changed his life.

"You can't save the world," said Roumain, 32, "but you can help the people of the world. It saved my life. Statistically speaking, I should have been in prison at least once, had a couple of children and been unemployed."

Instead, he's a composer with a growing reputation whose music has been performed around the world. Roumain, who's an African-American of Haitian descent, can mix hip-hop and classical traditions, or jazz and classical.

The *New York Times* wrote: "Daniel Bernard Roumain is about as omnivorous as a contemporary musician gets."

Roumain is chairman of theory and composition at the Harlem School of the Arts, assistant composer in residence of the Orchestra of St. Luke's and music director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, all in New York.

He lives in Harlem and visits Arizona four to six times a year, with visits lasting from a few days to two weeks. This is the second year of his three-year contract with Public Events.

"He's great at communicating the human commonality of music," Reed said. "A 5-year-old Latino kid or a 70-year-old Anglo person can be equally moved. He's really brilliant."

In Roumain's first year with Public Events, he worked with school and church groups, including the Highland High School in Gilbert and the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in central Phoenix. The last two groups joined for a group concert in October.

"He was able to pull those two groups together in only about five days, and do it so well, it seemed as if it were a fully produced concert," Reed said.

The program as a whole, including the work with Roumain, intends to reach between 25,000 and 30,000 students and adults in a year.

"The work we do with Daniel is much in line with our mission," Reed said. "And he's done brilliantly."

The idea for an outreach program came from Public Events executive director Colleen Jennings-Roggensack, who says the mission of ASU Public Events is to "Connect Communities" through the arts by showcasing works that cross racial, ethnic, religious, social and international lines.

"And it permeates our whole organization," Reed said.

"We are very excited to have Daniel working within our community for the next few years," Jennings-Roggensack said.

We have an extensive outreach program in place, but this is the first time that we have been able to offer residency work with the same artist over an extended period of time.



"What that means for the community is that they will have the chance to develop lasting relationships with Daniel and will be able to delve deeper into musical projects and education."

Roumain, who began playing violin when he was 5, believes that music should enter our lives early. He remembers the first orchestral concert he attended, performed by a community-college orchestra in New York. He was 6. "I'll never forget it," he said. They played Brahms *Academic Festival Overture* - Roumain sings a few bars: "Dum tah-dah, duh-Dum-tah-dah, duh Dum . . ."

"I thought, 'How could this be possible? How could that many people be doing this together?' It was a joy to see that many people in harmony together. Even then.

"But that's what an orchestra is: It's a village, it's a community."

Now, when he teaches music theory at the Harlem School of the Arts, he says, he talks about the disconnect between classical music and hip-hop.

"I say to them, 'It's going to be easy for you in your lives to point out the differences. The real art is in finding the similarities. If you can find the similarities in Bach and Mendelssohn, that's the real thing.'

"It's about finding common ground. It's more difficult, but more rewarding."

It's not an issue of being Black, he said: "Not a lot of young people of any kind are going into classical music."

Roumain speaks not only with conviction, but with speed: It's hard to keep up with him, and if he doesn't think he has made his point, he'll say it a different way, maybe two or three times, to make sure he's understood. He has the eagerness of a puppy.

"There is an aspect of innocence to Daniel that is endearing," Reed said.

"That's part of why people open up to him, whether musicians or non-musicians. If something sets him apart, it is that he can connect a lot of different communities with classical music.

"Not a lot of classically trained musicians are out there doing it to the extent he is."

His mission to take art music to the people is something he shares with Glass, who's making a special trip to Tempe to share the stage with Roumain.

"His career is unprecedented," Roumain said of Glass.

"It's an example of faith. It's someone saying, 'Not only will I create a new sound and perspective, but I'm going to create a new audience.' That's important."

Glass is one of the most popular composers working in serious music and regularly sells out concerts even in towns where the symphony plays to many empty seats.

"Philip Glass has really done that on a worldwide scale," Roumain said. "He made it possible for a composer to be popular, cool and hip.

"Phil is not a religious person, but I imagine he has a lot of faith in his self-expression. That's important, and that's part of his legacy. I don't have his achievement, but I share faith that a young Black man in this country can make a living as a composer.

"I'm not religious, either, but I recognize that he is giving me a blessing."