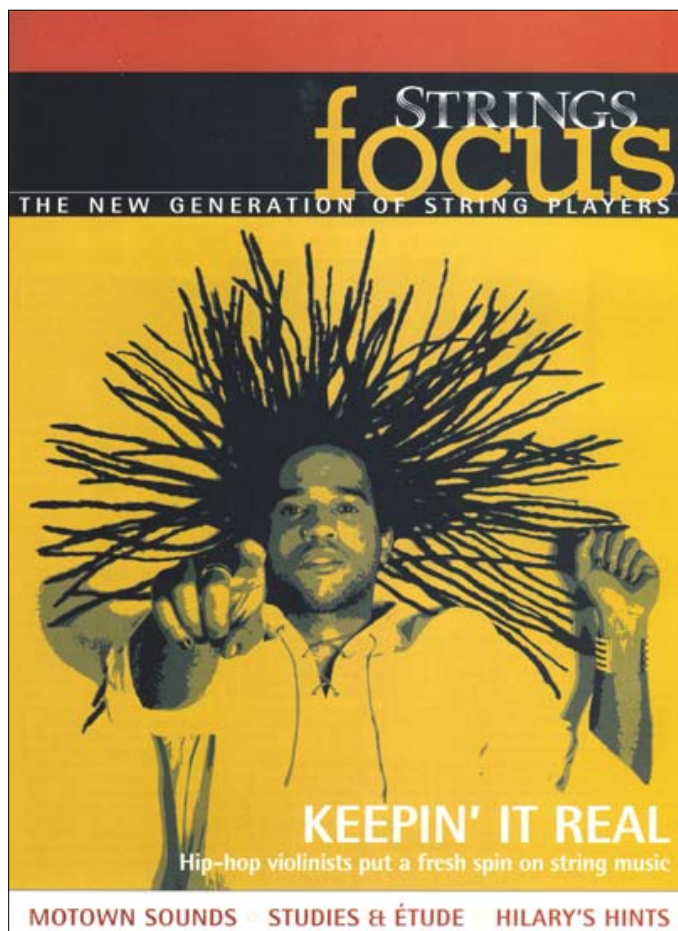


STRINGS

February 2005

a fresh SPIN Classically trained players take the violin in to the high-energy world of hip-hop



by David Templeton

When Miri Ben-Ari left her native Israel to take on New York City—this was back in the late 1990s, when Ben-Ari was barely out of her teens—the classically trained violinist was dead-set on making a name for herself as an inventive, energetic young jazz violinist. Jazz had been her inspiration for years, ever since hearing her first Charlie Parker record at age 17, though by then Ben-Ari had more than proven herself as a classical player. It was Isaac Stern who had presented her, seven years earlier, with her very first violin, and during her mandatory stint in Israel's military she won a place as a member of the acclaimed Israeli Army String Quartet. By the time she made the move to America to study at Mannes School of Music, however, it was the Big Apple's legendary jazz-club scene that she was dreaming of.

For a while, those dreams were coming true; a professional alliance with jazz great Wynton Marsalis led to a few well-received CDs (*Sahara*, *Song of the Promised Land*, and *Temple of Beautiful: Live at the Blue Note*) and her reputation as an eclectic session player had won her a number of high-profile gigs playing with such jazz and pop megastars as Patti LaBelle and Alicia Keys.

Then Miri Ben-Ari discovered hip-hop.

It was rap impresario Wyclef Jean, recognizing Ben-Ari as a natural improviser with a surplus of attitude and determination, who first

encouraged her to record violin on one of his albums. Something clicked for Ben-Ari, and suddenly, the sexy violinist from Israel was in big demand in the hip-hop world, where audiences couldn't believe what they were seeing and hearing, but couldn't get enough of the musical style she began to call "urban strings." In short order, Ben-Ari found herself working with the industry's biggest hip-hop names, including Twista, Jay-Z, and Kanye West, with whom she collaborated on the smash-hit album *The College Dropout*, contributing that signature "urban strings" sound to nearly every cut on the CD.

"The way I [approach a hip-hop track] is I orchestrate it," she explains. "My orchestration chops are coming from my playing classical music so long, and being familiar with classical composition and harmony. I use all of that experience to know how to execute and to voice all of this."

Whatever she's doing, it's working. Ben-Ari hasn't stopped touring and recording since hip-hop took her in, and her rising reputation has been rocket-ship hot, partly through knock-'em-dead backup appearances on hip-hop shows like HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, NBC's *Showtime at the Apollo*, and BET's *106 & Park*. Now, Ben-Ari is poised to take off as a solo artist. Universal Records is about to release a major-label debut CD on which Ben-Ari takes the spotlight, with a little help from the hip-hop world's hottest performers. The name of the new album? *Miri Ben-Ari: Hip-Hop Violinist*.

Ben-Ari may be hip-hop's most high-profile string player, but she is hardly the only one to fall under the influence of black urban music. At the prestigious Orchestra of St. Luke's, the violinist and assistant composer-in-residence Dr. Daniel Bernard Roumain—whom the *New York Times* recently hailed as "a dreadlocked, hip-hop-embracing composer"—has been winning kudos for groundbreaking work and an education program that has drawn a number of gifted young string players and composers into the realm of hip-hop-influenced classical music. At an August 24 recital at the Studio Museum in Harlem, Roumain—director of St. Luke's acclaimed Young Composer's Program—showcased the works of five students (Nate Sloan, Whitney Williams, Melanie Charles, Kasaun Henry, and Wynne Bennett) as well as his own Hip-Hop Study and Étude in C sharp minor for two violins and cello.

The program led the *Times* reviewer to opine that the young educator "is creating a miracle" at the St. Luke's program: "Mr. Roumain has taken a handful of teenagers (and two people in their 20s), got them fired up about the possibilities of classical composition, and inspired them to write short but probing, vital concert pieces."

There's no doubt that blending hip-hop and strings can lead to a creative workout.

Asked if adapting to hip-hop has stretched her as a musician, Ben-Ari replies, with a laugh, "Absolutely! Are you serious? To play hip-hop, I've had to take everything that I had, everything I know, everything, to do all that I'm doing now.

"My technique is very classically oriented. I might use Bach-type harmonies or something I learned from the other classical composers, the same way I'm inspired by gospel music or Stevie Wonder. And jazz. Jazz music gave me the freedom to improvise and harmonize, to learn permutational time.

"Whatever kind of musician you are, you take everything you know, and you bring it to the music you are making." Just as her classical training and jazz experience set her up to play hip-hop, Ben-Ari believes that playing hip-hop has improved her, overall, as a violinist.

"Hip-hop challenges me and tests me," she says. "I think I'm a much better musician now than I was before I started playing

(Strings page 2)

hip-hop. It's a very creative, sophisticated community, because these are very creative people."

That observation is shared by a generation of young, classically trained players, including Roumain and his students, who are finding ideas, inspiration, and identity in the realm of hip-hop music. "Hip-hop is a lot more sophisticated than a lot of people realize," says Roumain, whose website describes him as "one of the few composers to have danced alongside Bill T. Jones, played with Philip Glass, and jammed with Cassandra Wilson."

He also ranks among the very few (perhaps the only) classically trained players/composers to have conducted scholarly musicological dissections of hip-hop music. His *Hip-Hop Studies* and *Études* features short compositions that Roumain has written, one in each key, in which he demonstrates the five parameters of hip-hop music: sound, harmony, melody, rhythm, and form. In hip-hop, he makes it clear, there is quite a bit more going on than many have noticed.

"If you were to notate exactly what goes on in one track by Kanye West," Roumain says, "I can tell you that it is just as complicated and just as complex as anything by Sofia Gubaidulina. Absolutely."

Roumain, who now lives in Harlem, grew up in South Florida, where at the tender age of five, he began playing the violin as part of his elementary school's (now eliminated) musical arts program. His earliest performance memory is of playing "Hatikva," the Israeli national anthem, at a Jewish retirement home.

"At that time, I'm five years old," he says. "I don't know the significance of 'Hatikva.' I don't know I'm *black*, really, let alone understand the implications of a little Haitian kid in South Florida playing 'Hatikva' for 700 retired Jewish people, many of whom survived the Holocaust."

As a teen, it was his turn to be turned-on by hip-hop, while still retaining his love of Mozart and Beethoven. He went to college, earned a PhD in music composition and theory from the University of Michigan, and became proficient as a player of classical music, but never lost his love for hip-hop. It's only natural, he asserts, that with his background he'd be eager to blend the sounds of Bach and Tupac.

"I grew up with hip-hop music," he says. "I went to college and I got my training in classical music, but I never stopped listening to hip-hop."

"So now, I'm trying to find a way to integrate and reflect all these things, and, to borrow a hip-hop term, to also 'keep it real.' I'm not trying to assimilate or make reference to hip-hop. I'm asking an orchestra, for example, to use a drum-kit player. I composed a piece called *Harlem Essay*, which has a drum-kit player, and then I went out and sampled people in my neighborhood. So it's a piece for orchestra and drum kit and tape."

That piece was performed at Carnegie Hall in 2001.



DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: Blending the sounds of Bach and Tupac.

"I believe that, to the extent that jazz has had a very real impact on classical chamber and orchestral music, hip-hop will have an even more profound effect," Roumain says. "I already see that happening, and I believe that hip-hop is going to exceed the influence that jazz has had on the classical music world."

Hip-hop's influence, he predicts, will be strongest on the next generation of string players, possibly those young people who write to him and Ben-Ari by the hundreds, telling how they've been inspired to study music, to pick up the violin or the cello, because of what they've seen these young hip-hop players accomplish.

"I do a lot of workshops with younger people, and I work with a lot of youth symphonies," Roumain says. "These are classically trained kids, and while a lot of them may not know that much about Palestrina, or they may not really know the principal theme of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, one thing they all share in common is that they all know who Snoop Dogg is, and they all know Jay Z."

"Whether we want to admit this or not, the music that we listen to becomes a part of our musical DNA. It does. I've worked with some of the great professional orchestras of the world, but some of the best performances of my music have come from youth orchestras, younger chamber-music ensembles, and that's simply because they get it. They *get* it."

"They understand the rhythm, the nature, the musical politics, if you will, of what it is I'm trying to do."

Ultimately, Roumain asserts that hip-hop is the perfect vehicle for musical composition and experimentation, in that it is flexible enough to enclose all musical styles and traditions.

"The hip-hop style and language supports classical music, country music, blues, electronic, rock," he points out. "Hip-hop may be the most supportive musical style ever. It's so fluently and effortlessly able to support and incorporate other forms of music. Hip-hop will be part of the future of music."

That said, no one is claiming that playing hip-hop as a classically educated violinist is an easy thing.

Quite the contrary.

"There are challenges in all types of music," says Ben-Ari. "Hip-hop is hip-hop. It's not classical. It's not jazz. It's not pop music or bubblegum music. Hip-hop is its own unique genre, and when you play hip-hop, you have to *know* hip-hop. You need to listen to hip-hop, you need to know artists, you need to know their work, you need to know their history. And more than anything else, you need to know production, you need to have a feeling for engineering, because there is a lot that is technical about hip-hop."

Another thing it helps to have, Ben-Ari suggests, is attitude. Hip-hop, she is fond of saying, is all about attitude. Asked to define that "attitude" as it relates to hip-hop, she laughs.

"By attitude I mean *gangsta* attitude," she says. "I'm a gangsta for real! I'm a gangsta in my heart. The way that I play, I don't hold back. When I get onstage, I give my hundred percent. There's something about hip-hop that allows me to do that. Nobody likes you the way a hip-hop audience likes you. It's so true and raw, the attitudes and emotions of hip-hop. This music is about soul, it's about truth, it's about honesty."

"I guess that's why I'm the hip-hop violinist, 'cause that's how I play."

"I don't hold anything back," she laughs. "And that's my advice to young players. You might play classical. You can play jazz. You can play hip-hop. But whatever you do, let the world hear everything you have. Don't you dare hold anything back. That's the attitude that will help you succeed."

hip-hop étude No. 4

BY DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAN

My *Hip-Hop Studies and Etudes, Book 1*, began as a response to the musical and cultural needs of students at the Harlem School of the Arts, where I was chair of the music theory and composition departments. Each study and etude was composed with the notion of explaining the different key signatures, melodies, harmonies, sounds, rhythms, and forms found in hip-hop music. Additionally, these short, musical vignettes examine aspects of hip-hop music in a detailed, systematic method, by using accents, commonly found rhythms, repetition, and other compositional techniques.



DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAN

The studies and etudes can be played by a single instrument or any group of instruments, all players reading from the score, transposing the treble or bass lines appropriately. You can play them at any comfortable tempo, though I have suggested ♩ = 92 in this one. Hip-Hop Study and Etude No. 4 in G Minor. Players should feel free to repeat any measure or combination of measures. I encourage new, original arrangements of the material, including placing some of the measures "out of order" or playing the material in canon or in some other series of sequences.

Finally, for those who improvise, I would encourage you to do so to the extent that the material is still recognizable.

The final publication of the studies and etudes will include suggested drum-kit patterns and other "beats" for each one. (Visit www.dbrmusic.com for details.) For now, I certainly think playing this music with percussionists improvising their own parts is ideal.

Have fun!

—D.B.R.

1-92

