

Music review: 'Darwin's Meditation for the People of Lincoln' hits powerful notes

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By MANUEL MENDOZA / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Darwin's Meditation for the People of Lincoln is no dry history lesson. It could just as well be called *Daniel's Meditation for the People of Haiti*.

Daniel Bernard Roumain, the Haitian-American composer of the 90-minute mixed-media work, takes a highly personal view of his title figures, focusing on the tragedies suffered by Darwin and Lincoln and the connections between the two men and the island nation of his ancestors. He employs a gaggle of musical approaches, most notably rousing orchestrations of Haitian folk and pop.

Often shifting between majesty and melancholy, *Darwin's Meditation* was as powerful an emotional exploration as a historical one as Roumain and a Southern Methodist University chamber orchestra performed the piece Thursday at Winspear Opera House as part of the TITAS music series.

Roumain, a classically trained violinist, built the eclectic music around text from Darwin's letters, Lincoln's speeches and other written sources formed into a repetitive, chantlike collage by playwright Daniel Beaty. This "pocket play" was powerfully recited by actor D.J. Mendel, who co-directed *Darwin's Meditation*, and by Haitian singer Emeline Michel, who also sang from her own repertoire.

The words, in English and Creole, gained additional weight when projected as video floating across a screen at the back of the stage, like thought-bubble recollections of what Mendel and Michel had been saying. "Fourscore and seven years ago, my heart began to break and for a while I did not know what it meant to be free."

The heartbreak in *Darwin's Meditation* concerns tragic coincidences in the lives of the scientist and the politician. Both were born on Feb. 12, 1809. Both lost their mothers when they were young. Both lost children. Lincoln wrestled with slavery, Darwin with his religious beliefs after he was attacked by the orthodox. Roumain weaves this overlapping personal history with references to the overlapping histories of imperial England, colonial and post-revolutionary America, and Haiti, site of a successful slave rebellion.

Much like his anything-goes playing style – plucking his violin like a guitar or tapping it like a drum – Roumain demanded a variety of sounds from the accomplished student orchestra, from drones and atonality to cinematic scoring to a Haitian genre called kompa to a backbeat fueled by rock 'n' roll bass and drums.

