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DBR, who performs with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra this Sunday (February 14), has a solid grounding in classical music, but he's experimented with everything from jazz beats to turntables.

## **DBR mixes voodoo and the violin**

### **For his entrancing new concerto, string sensation DBR draws on the rituals and dances of his Haitian roots**

By John Lucas

On the surface, a classical-music performance would seem to bear little resemblance to a Haitian voodoo rite, the usual starched-collar formality of the former standing in marked contrast to the wild drumming and entranced—or spirit-possessed, as practitioners believe—dancing of the latter. Daniel Bernard Roumain, however, sees strong parallels between the two, and that's what drove the New York-based violinist and composer to write his Voodoo Violin Concerto.

“The piece for me started when I heard [famously animated violinist] Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg telling an interviewer, ‘When I play the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto I go into a trance, like an out-of-body experience,’ ” says Roumain, reached by telephone before a concert in Akron, Ohio. “When she said that and they showed her playing, I immediately thought of Haitian dance music, or voodoo ritual. Or even the parties that my parents used to go to. All these things are very Haitian—that you become so overwhelmed with the feeling, the music, the sight and sound and smell of it all, that you become someone else.”

Born in Chicago and raised in Florida, Roumain, who usually goes by just his initials, comes by his intimate connection with Haiti's culture via his parents, who emigrated from there. In response to the catastrophic earthquake that struck the Caribbean nation on January 12, DBR has announced that he'll be donating a portion of the merchandise sales from all of his concert appearances this year to relief efforts. He has also written a short but moving musical meditation on the disaster, “Haiti 2010”, which National Public Radio's Latino USA has posted to YouTube as part of a video appeal for donations. (You can watch it at [www.youtube.com/user/LUSARADIO](http://www.youtube.com/user/LUSARADIO).)

Of Voodoo Violin Concerto, which he'll perform with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra at the Orpheum Theatre on Sunday (February 14) as part of the Cultural Olympiad, DBR notes that it also reflects his upbringing in the United States.

That's evident right off the top: the piece opens with a solo violin playing a distinctly bluesy lick. Before long, a drum kit and bass come in, adding a skittering bebop rhythm. There's a Haitian motif in there, too, but most listeners would be hard-pressed to pick it out.

"In this particular work, there is a Haitian folk tune that I've completely reimagined," DBR says. "It's not even really recognizable or representative. It's a very kind of Bartókian treatment of this Haitian tune towards the last minute. I have another piece, called *Haitian Essay for Orchestra*, where the Haitian folksong is much more recognizable. But in this piece, I'm approaching Haitian music almost as a strategy. First of all, there's lots of percussion; there's lots of melody; there's lots of moments of participation from the orchestra in a different way. They have a chance to literally improvise."

DBR will be doing nothing but improvising on Monday (February 15), when he'll be joined on turntables and laptop by DJ Spooky for a free LiveCity event at David Lam Park. He might plug in his electric violin for that, but he'll be performing on an amplified acoustic one at the Orpheum. Don't expect a conventional recital, though.

"I'll be playing on an acoustic instrument, but I'm still going to be doing things with the violin that are very unique to me," DBR says. "I have my own library, or catalogue, of extended techniques: all different kinds of plucking, staccato, percussive playing, some bow techniques, maybe my feet knocking on the ground with the rhythm, sometimes vocalizing and playing at the same time, speaking directly to the audience as I play. You know, I take a cadenza and I really make it my own."

He has a strong grounding in the classical world, having earned a doctorate in music at the University of Michigan, but Roumain has never taken an orthodox approach. He has collaborated with everyone from Philip Glass to Lady Gaga, but when the *Straight* asks him what he'd really like to do, he answers: "Elevator music." And he's not kidding, either.

The composer says he wants to see people engaging with art in the public realm, and to that end he would like to create music to be played in multiplexes before screenings of Hollywood blockbusters, or to be shown, with accompanying visuals, on the TV screens in taxicabs. And in elevators, too, of course.

"In some cases, you might be in an elevator for two minutes," he says. "That's a pretty long time. Certainly long enough for a pop song....I want to do something that is well done, that makes people want to be in an elevator. It's a real opportunity."

"I think that in the performing arts, and classical music specifically, we need more moments of pure introduction," Roumain argues. "We always want the full meal. We want audiences to buy the record; we want them to go to the concert. Those are major investments. That's kind of a marriage. There's nothing wrong with teasing. There's nothing wrong with a one-night stand."

Provocative talk, but DBR insists his goal isn't to push people's buttons. He is well aware, though, that his take on classical music could rub some purists the wrong way, what with the jazz beats and the elevators and the amplification and the turntables. "Anything new and 'innovative' has a degree of uncertainty," he acknowledges. "And I think that can produce a certain amount of resistance, because it is unknown, and that produces fear. Now, the best thing you can do is not to bow to the criticism, but to engage in the conversation—to explain what you're doing and why."