



A thoroughly modern maestro

by Scott Kearnan | June 14, 2010



"I'm not your mom's classical violinist."

Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR) has a point. Sure, even the most mild-mannered mother occasionally has her "hip" moments - humming along to Lady Gaga at the supermarket, keeping one pair of trendy jeans in her closet so she can go "fashion forward" at select family cookouts. (Slow down, Mom! We can't keep up!) But we're not sure she'd expect Roumain, with his head full of dreadlocks, pierced nose, and musical approach that melds classical fundamentals with contemporary flourishes of DJ turntablism and hip-hop, to be premiering a new work with the **Boston Pops** at **Symphony Hall** (301 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, 617.266.1492) at 8 p.m. on June 19 and 3 p.m. on June 20. (Tickets are \$20-\$89 at bso.org.)

Though he's earned major critical kudos, classical purists may blanch (or bristle) at DBR's sound: in place of a traditional four-string, he uses a custom-made six-string amplified violin that allows him to add funky bass lines ("There's really nothing else like it in the world," he says), plus effects pedals for live looping and reverbs. He collaborates with artists like DJ Spooky, Lady Gaga (you hear that, Mom?), and his own multicultural ensemble, DBR & The Mission, to fuse hot musical hybrids. But even elitist critics can't deny the power of his pedigree: he studied for his doctorate under a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer at the University of Michigan, and he's now a visiting associate professor at his undergraduate alma mater, Vanderbilt.

Before his Pops gig, DBR, who splits his time between New York City and the Boston suburbs (his wife is a local), checked in with *STUFF*.

Tell us about the piece you're premiering. I'll be performing *Woodbox Violin Concerto*, which is based off my latest album, *Woodbox Beats & Balladry*. It's a new work, 10 minutes long. I took two tracks from the album and reimagined them.... It was an exciting challenge. The biggest thing is that for the orchestra it was re-scored from a six-string electric instrument to be for a four-string acoustic instrument.



Who are some of your musical influences? Philip Glass, Prince, Bjork.... These are very innovative artists who kind of created their own music and their own audience. Those are three big inspirations that I've modeled my early career after, artists that really inspired me and give me courage to keep doing what I'm doing and not doubt my own judgment.

How have you modeled your career after them? Well, Philip Glass had his own ensemble. Prince for years was playing a whole bevy of different instruments. He's been a very stylized guy, and with a six-string instrument, my music is very much stylized [as a] hybrid form of dance music and classical music. Bjork has always paid a lot of attention to the visual aspect of her music and the relationships she has with other avant-garde artists. I certainly pay attention to that and have a lot of avant-garde artist friends.

Have you encountered "music snobs" in the classical community because of your approach? Sure, that's always been an issue. Not all of my records and everything that I do is easily accessible, as I'm finding out! But there's a supportive audience for my work.... I have a full schedule for next season and just had a big meeting all about 2011-2012 and the new record and tour for that year. I'm trying to find ways to make music more accessible.

What's the direction of that next album? I can say this: it's where The Roots, The Black Eyed Peas, Regina Carter, and Nina Simone all meet.

Who's on your "wish list" for future collaborators? Questlove, Bjork, Lil Wayne, and Alan Gilbert, the conductor with the New York Philharmonic.

Last question: your parents are Haitian immigrants. Have you been involved with post-earthquake relief there? Absolutely. I've been wanting and planning to go this summer as part of those efforts. I'm continuing to blog about what's going on there, and there's a big concert planned in Central Park this summer with a bunch of Haitian poets to aid in the relief efforts. I'm continuing to give portions of my live performances to Haitian relief efforts, and a recording is planned with Haitian singer Emeline Michel. My big goal, though, is to get down and do some work there.