

The Boston Globe

MUSIC REVIEW | by Matthew Guerrieri, Globe Correspondent | September 24, 2007

Strings and scratches mix in a bodacious collaboration



Daniel Bernard Roumain (left) and DJ Scientific perform "Sonata for Violin and Turntables" Saturday at the ICA. (aram boghosian for the boston globe)

The genre-busting violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain (aka DBR), joined by his frequent collaborator DJ Scientific, played their "Sonata for Violin and Turntables" Saturday at the Institute of Contemporary Art; throughout the evening, it was pleasantly hard to find the line between DBR the musician and DBR the showman.

For example: In one solo violin movement, Roumain began a simple, slow, rising scale, the tonality slowly morphing from major to minor. As he walked along the back perimeter of the ICA stage, the heavy curtains behind him slowly rose, revealing city lights reflected off the harbor - a flourish any impresario would envy.

The "Sonata," in eight thoroughly rock-and-hip-hop-influenced movements, deliberately leaves substantial room for improvisation and creativity. Much of the drama comes from the contrast between Roumain, who coaxed a mercurial sound from the violin, keeping its very timbre in flux through substantial amplification and electronics, and DJ Scientific (Chris Davis), whose ideas were more vertically-layered, often sampling the ambient mix and then looping it back on itself, the beats branching and flowering. The open arrangement - a road map of modular textures, rather than a fully notated flow - emphasized juxtaposition and superimposition: Initially abrupt transitions between different rhythms and speeds smoothed out as the concert progressed.

Roumain's frequent aggressive, percussive lower-string bowing (with an extra two

strings added on to his instrument for bass lines) meshed marvelously with Scientific's turntable scratching. Sound effects made occasional appearances, most strikingly the duo's sirens closing the hard-driving fourth movement. The two most extemporaneous movements were anchored by text - the third, a DJ solo, sampled rap fragments (dazzlingly scratched) as well as presidential candidate Barack Obama ("What binds us together is greater than what drives us apart"), while the fifth, beginning with the curtain-raising, led into DBR ruminating on an epiphany earlier in the day at Trinity Church, uplifting testimony curiously backed by an ominous, pensive vamp.

If anything, ideas were too short-lived: Only the first two parts recapitulated sections in classical fashion, and only the trance-like seventh movement and the blistering toccata finale settled into steady, extended grooves. But both performers brought a combination of unabashed earnestness and quicksilver musical wit that carried the listener through less-structured patches.

As an encore, Natural Fact and Thesis, MCs of the hip-hop group Unconscious Logic (another Davis collaboration) performed their songs "Sunshine" and "Substance"; in the latter, freed from any score, DBR and Scientific found their most playful musical banter of the night.