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New classical



Matthew Craig/The Commercial Appeal

Haitian-American composer and violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain talks to Carver High School band students while sophomore Leshea Wright tries her hand at playing the violin. Roumain was in town for a performance Sunday at GPAC and visited Carver on Monday.

Composer, violinist takes modern approach to ancient music form

By ZACK McMILLIN
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Standing before 20 students in the Carver High band room, Daniel Bernard Roumain said out loud what many of them were thinking.

With dreadlocks flowing past his waist, sporting piercings and wearing designer jeans, this man did not conform to expectations many held for a classically trained composer and violinist.

"My Haitian mother tells me, 'You don't look like you've got a Ph.D.,"' Roumain

said, generating rows of smiling faces.

Yet there was Roumain, 38, trying to inspire those before him with his own story, mixing narrative with a dazzling performance on a violin he said he has carried from elementary school in south Florida to college at Vanderbilt and to graduate school at the University of Michigan.

"I want to tell you what this — these guts, this string, this plastic — has done for me," he said of the violin he has played since age 5.

Roumain, named by Esquire magazine last year as one of the "new faces of clas-

sical music," was brought to town by the Germantown Performing Arts Center, where he performed on Sunday afternoon with his ensemble. Called DBR and the Mission, it features a string quartet and a hip-hop deejay.

On Monday morning, they performed for 650 students from Memphis and Shelby County schools, who eagerly took to Roumain's compositions, a blend of hip-hop elements in classical structures.

"It was an incredible morning," said

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ROUMAIN

Tania Castroverde
Moskalenko.

Moskalenko and Emily Hefley, GPAC's education coordinator, brought Roumain to Carver, where some of the students were just learning to play. Others, like junior Aaron Dunlap, can play three or four instruments and harbor larger ambitions.

Dunlap may never learn to compose nor to play 25 instruments like Roumain, but he has a clear goal: "I want to be a band director."

Roumain, who calls the vi-

olin "my weapon of choice," encouraged the students to pursue their musical ambitions with ferocity.

"It is totally OK and, in fact, it is necessary to take your education selfishly," Roumain told them. "It is one place in life you must take selfishly."

Like a magician, Roumain revealed to the students the versatility of the violin.

Thumping strings, he said his violin was "like a bass."

Pulling it down, he played it like an acoustic guitar, then gave it the sound of a dulcimer, then put it back up to "make it laugh."

When he made it sound like a flute, Joanna Williams,

herself a flutist, said she "got tears in my eyes, it was so beautiful."

At one point, Roumain offered sophomore Leshea Wright an opportunity to try to play his violin. Wright managed to tease out the most elemental notes - E, G, D and A. "Keep going," Roumain said. "Really dig in. Believe in it."

For Roumain, the violin had given him something to believe in. He hoped he had given something back.

"When you come into a house, my good Haitian parents told me, you must bring a gift."

— Zack McMillin: 529-2562