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This Is *Really* Longhair, and the Violin Is Cool

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DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN may be getting tired of being described as the only classical composer and violinist who has dreadlocks and loves hip-hop. Yet since he is still in the early stages of his career, distinctions of any kind can be useful.

Mr. Roumain has found that once people get past the visual image and hear his inventive, energetic music - a varied body of work that runs from Coplandesque orchestral scores to chamber pieces inflected with various forms of pop and electronic music - they want to hear more. And having seen him, they don't forget him. So if the description irks him, he isn't saying so, yet.

"See, I used to be a black man," he said one afternoon in early December. "Then I became a black American composer. But if you ask me today how I feel, I'll tell you I feel like a very lucky young man."

Wearing oval-rimmed glasses, a sweatshirt from his undergraduate alma mater (Vanderbilt University), an earring and red sneakers, Mr. Roumain sat at a table in the back of the Bowery Poetry Club, where his band, DBR's Mission, had performed the night before.

"Why do I feel lucky?" he added. "I'm making a living entirely from my music. I've been able to combine the music I grew up with - hip-hop, classical music, rock, jazz and soul - and in some ways, to be an ambassador, certainly for what's going on in Harlem, where I live, but also for what's going on in contemporary classical music. I think contemporary classical music has found its soul, or maybe regained its soul and found its heart. I'm very excited by what's going on now."

Mr. Roumain will perform some of his latest music at Joe's Pub on Jan. 15, but these days he is everywhere, thanks to artist- or composer-in-residence positions at Pace University, Arizona State University and the Bowery Poetry Club. He is also the assistant composer in residence at the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and he has collaborated with the composer Philip Glass, the choreographer Bill T. Jones, the jazz singer Cassandra Wilson, the hip-hop artist DJ Spooky and the new-age composer Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Mr. Roumain claims no responsibility for the musical omniverousness of the world he works in. As a graduate student of William Bolcom, Michael Daugherty and Bright Sheng at the

University of Michigan, he saw up close how diverse musical styles can be blended. And during his student years, he became a fan of Bang on a Can, a New York group of composers that encourages stylistic integration. By the time he arrived in New York, on New Year's Day 1998, the intersection of pop and contemporary classical music was getting crowded.

But Mr. Roumain has been quick to make innovations of his own, including the use of hip-hop techniques. Some of his recent experiments will be heard in the performance with DBR's Mission at Joe's Pub. The program is built around his "Hip-Hop Studies and Études," of which he has composed 24, one in each major and minor key. True to form, these vary greatly in style, from slow, introspective Neo-Classical ruminations to rhythmically complicated, riffy pieces that would not be out of place in a dance club.

The instrumentation is flexible, too: Mr. Roumain has performed them on the violin and the piano, on his own and with his band, which includes an amplified string quartet, bass, drums, keyboards, a D.J. and a laptop. Although the études are written on a full scale, he said, they can be performed by any combination of musicians, who are free to rearrange and repeat certain of the works' "cells," or short thematic passages, just as hip-hop D.J.'s do with sampled music.

"I'm looking at all aspects of hip-hop," Mr. Roumain said, "especially aspects that are oftentimes overlooked. There's a wonderful melodic aesthetic to hip-hop that never gets explored. Depending on the artists, hip-hop can be increasingly complex, with sophisticated structures. So my focus is not so much the rapper, or the vocalist, but what's happening in the track. I like the idea of isolating a moment and trying to stretch it. Last night,



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when we played these études, we added a lot of hip-hop beats for the first time."

Mr. Roumain, 32, is the son of Haitian immigrants who apparently gave him his start as a musical polyglot. In addition to Haitian folk music -Mr. Roumain used some in his first orchestral score, "Haitian Essay," which was performed by the Detroit Symphony when he was still a student - they introduced him to rock, soul and classical music. He remembers the family record collection including everything from the Eagles, Abba and Stevie Wonder to the huge Time-Life LP series devoted to Beethoven's complete works. Other music filtered in from nearby Cuban, Jamaican and Puerto Rican communities.

But for reasons Mr. Roumain can't explain, he was drawn to the violin when he was 5.

"When I was growing up, playing the violin was not cool," he said. "To be a young black boy in South Florida, playing the violin - that could get you beat up. But the violin called to me. It wasn't even a choice. I just knew I was supposed to play this instrument."

He attended a performing-arts high school, but nearly didn't go on to college, partly because he found the idea of a college campus unappealing and partly because he had found a job with the rap group 2Live Crew.

"It was South Florida," he said with a shrug when asked about that turn of events. "2Live Crew began as a group of D.J.'s who played at parties. Everybody knew about them, and I was out there, partying and hanging out. I did a lot of different things with them: some production work, playing on some records. Luther Campbell was very good to me, very supportive. I was kind of an enigma to him. Who's this young black kid who composes and plays the violin?"

Eventually, Mr. Roumain's father persuaded him to attend Vanderbilt, in Nashville, which offered a full scholarship. He went on to complete his doctorate at the University of Michigan, and then gave New York a second try.

"Nobody told me how to make a career," he said. "Nobody can tell you. You create it. You fight for it. So on a Monday I did my dissertation defense. On Tuesday I was in New York, and by Wednesday I found my apartment. By the end of the week, I had packed up everything and was driving here."

Fighting for it meant working as a rehearsal pianist for dance companies, sometimes as much as 14 hours a day, seven days a week, over the three and half years he spent getting his works around. He won the Whitaker New Music Readings of the American Composers Orchestra, which led to a performance of his "Harlem Essay," and he had music played in the Music at the Anthology series, which brought him to the attention of Mr. Glass. He was also commissioned to write music for "The Breathing Show" by Mr. Jones, and he became the music director of Mr. Jones's company.

But probably his most promising current association is with the Orchestra of St. Luke's. In addition to playing his music - most notably, the premiere of "Fast Black Dance Machine" - the orchestra has put him in charge of a program for young aspiring composers, an outgrowth of his teaching at the Harlem School of the Arts. In addition to taking private instruction and classes in which the mostly teenage students play their works for one another, Mr. Roumain's charges have spent time with Mr. Glass, Joan Tower (the orchestra's composer in residence) and Aaron Jay Kernis.

Last August Mr. Roumain presented his students' chamber works, all scored for strings, in a concert at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Some were jazz-tinged, some were quasi-Minimalist, and others were spiky, chromatic and rhythmically complex. It was clear that he had encouraged them to write the music they felt, rather than relying on classical models.

"When I started working with some of those students, they were terrified," he said. "You know, 'How do I write for a string quartet? How do I write for a cello?' And the first thing I told them was, let's not think of it as a cello. Who's your favorite singer? Let's start there. And to be honest, looking the way I do, playing the music I play, I think they can identify with me. Joshua Bell is an amazing violinist, but he might not have as much of a relevant persona to children at the Harlem School of the Arts as I do. That's not a boast, it's just that for them there is a cultural thing going on here."

Still, Mr. Roumain is trying to transcend those issues in his own work.

"I used to be very interested, as a composer, in documenting the African-American experience," he said. "Now I'm interested in the human experience. I'm interested in reaching a broader audience, but I'm not as interested in celebrity as community. I believe that where classical music began was in forwarding an idea for the common good. It's become something different in some ways. But I still believe that composers are the priests of that, the keepers of the flame."