

# The Miami Herald

## CLASSICALLY TRAINED VIOLINIST HIP-HOPS TO A DIFFERENT BEAT

ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ

February 5, 2005, Page 1E

"I'm hyper," says Daniel Bernard Roumain. "So I'm going to play some more." The young composer, who is appearing tonight as part of Miami Dade College's *Cultura del Lobo* series, is working his violin at a photo shoot in South Beach.

The sounds he pulls from his instrument are his own creation: at times strictly classical, then segueing into a vaguely gypsy/Middle Eastern/Asian groove, and often ripping like a blues/metal guitar solo.

One piece, he announces, is a "hip-hop étude." Sure enough, the polyrhythms are chopped and hard-edged with sudden stops and beginnings.

"I was improvising back there," he says afterward. "But what I play with my group is notated. . . . It's not scripted, but there has to be a rigidity, a formula, and then you can add some spice."

His kind of music is still developing, says Roumain, who now lives in Harlem and is in residence with the Orchestra of St. Luke, recalling that he used to perform standard classical music. A South Florida kid, he was an intern with the Florida Philharmonic and has fond memories of working with James Judd. "I've been playing with a symphony orchestra since I was 7. At the University of Michigan [where Roumain earned a doctorate] I conducted. But the days of Mozart and Brahms are gone for me. My career meant not doing that."

What he does is what the classical world calls "new music" -- in his case, his own. And that means working with all kinds of electronic devices and, more and more, delving into hip-hop. "Snoop Dog is great 21st century chamber music," he insists.

Roumain's influences are broad. Modernists like Stravinsky and Boulez. Jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock. But also Joni Mitchell ("a great American composer"); Willie Nelson; Eminem ("a great melodist"); Marvin Hamlisch, whom he heard growing up in Florida; Celia Cruz. Playing with the jazz orchestra of Dillard High School in Fort Lauderdale, he once opened for both Dizzy and Celia. The latter was a revelation: "Just hearing Celia speak was enough. She came into a room and soaked up all the oxygen."

One influence he dreams of working with some day is Bjork. But he already has collaborated with the most respected of his heroes, Philip Glass, whose eclecticism has rubbed off on the young Roumain.

Miami Dade College is sponsoring his concert, as well as workshops with students. Director of Cultural Affairs Michelle Hayes tapped Roumain for a Miami visit when she heard him speak in New York a year ago.

"We are always very drawn to artists who have the combination of tradition and innovation, a very hard line to negotiate," says Hayes. "People who do it well do incredibly intriguing work. I had heard his recorded music, but what sold me was listening to him talk about his work."

When Hayes learned Roumain hailed from South Florida, she became convinced and they struck a deal right then. Roumain was born in Skokie, Ill., to Haitian-American parents, but he moved to Florida as a child. "If I hadn't started playing the violin in elementary school, I never would," he says. Like most young people, a time came when he wanted to be cool, and "the violin wasn't cool." But now, Roumain is glad to note that "I'm not the only hip-hop violinist, not even the most famous or the one who makes the most money, and that's a good thing."

He composes directly on a laptop. "I haven't touched a pencil in years. But then, I'm the iPod generation." Indeed, the gizmo is one of the "instruments" he uses in performance. "I'm pretty blue collar," he says. "I wake up in the morning and start working at composition." He might begin on his violin or keyboards or a guitar. Then he puts it down on computer.

"There's an immediacy to the software. If I want to know what 10 trombones sound like with 10 tubas, I can hear it." But, he warns: "It can be misleading; you must be very careful! It is not 10 trombones and 10 tubas."

Computers, he notes, don't help with the immediacy of sounds. "There are some things only a violinist can do."

And, when he's not composing or rehearsing or performing, he tries to "go to work." He needs to experience other art, so he goes to concerts, museums, clubs. Recently, he was blown away by the Kronos Quartet, the great interpreter and promoter of new music, which did a "sound installation."

Electronic music, what is heard in dance clubs, intrigues him as well, and he has collaborated on some "concept albums," but he likes that sort of thing only when it's enhanced with acoustic instruments. "Electronica is a landscape and the acoustic instrument humanizes it; otherwise, it has a tendency to sound cold."

Roumain calls his own ensemble "electro-acoustic," the best of both worlds.

And the young composer likes to travel between worlds. The contrapuntal nature of African and African-American music draws him, but so does the great Western emphasis on melody. One world left to wander through is his own Haitian heritage.

"My parents used to sing folk tunes, fishermen's songs, and I've integrated that into my work. But I need to understand the artists, need to identify them." He confesses, wistfully, that he has never been to Haiti.

His eyes wander off into some Caribbean horizon inside his head. He knows what is calling him as an artist and that sooner or later he will have to go.