

Lifestyles

He digs hip-hop and Bach

By Joseph Dalton, Correspondent

It has become nearly impossible to miss Daniel Bernard Roumain's name in the world of contemporary performing arts. Actually, he often chooses to be billed with nothing more than his initials, DBR -- standard practice for hip-hop artists, but less so in the realm of Itzhak Perlman and Yo-Yo Ma.

Then again, Roumain is a classically trained musician who boldly blends the style and sound of hip-hop and J.S. Bach. In the process, this composer and violinist, who sports dreadlocks to his waist, has become a powerhouse -- a 36-year-old with top-level management, his own production company and a touring ensemble.

"He does seem to be the composer of the moment -- a wonderful, interesting guy," says David Alan Miller, music director of the Albany Symphony Orchestra, which commissioned Roumain twice in the late 1990s for the Dogs of Desire Ensemble and again in 2004.

Roumain has also written for or appeared with the orchestras of Dallas, Memphis, San Antonio, St. Louis and Brooklyn, among others. He holds a residency with the Orchestra of St. Luke's in New York, and is music director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Roumain also composed a guitar concerto for virtuoso Eliot Fisk. On Saturday, DBR & the Mission will perform "24 Bits: Hip-Hop Studies and Etudes" at N.C. State University's Stewart Theatre.

Amid his remarkable level of activity, Roumain comes off in conversation as an omnivorous artist and highly focused professional.

"I'm of the iPod generation," he says. "I want to hear everything and know it all and do everything, too, and play everything. The question is, how do you do that responsibly and in a sophisticated manner?"

As if answering his own question, he spoke a great deal about business models. No surprise, then, that Crain's New York Business has included him on its list of "40 Under 40 Business Stars."

"If I sell myself only as a composer, it's going to be very limited [in terms of] where my music is played and how much I can take in from those performances," he says. "But as a bandleader, performer and collaborator, it allows me to have serious collaborations with very serious artists, and my interest can be supported [financially]."

Roumain drops lots of names in conversation, constantly mentioning those who have influenced and inspired him. Musically, he links the seemingly unlikable: Nine Inch Nails and Korn with the composers William Bolcom and William Albright -- the latter two among his teachers at the University of Michigan, where Roumain earned a doctorate in composition in 2001.

But he's at least as enthusiastic about musicians who are also successful entrepreneurs, including Philip Glass, Ani DiFranco, Prince, Madonna and even the middle-age New Age pinup boy Yanni ("a multimillionaire composer!" gushes Roumain).

Whether the map is a musical score or a financial ledger, the realms of classical and popular music have always been one continuous landscape for Roumain, who began playing in garage rock bands just a few years after picking up the violin.



Is Daniel Bernard Roumain a hip-hop artist or a classical musician? How about both?

PHOTO BY LESLIE LYONS

Borrowing from the vernacular is nothing new for composers. The signature musical styles of 20th-century greats such as Bartok, Bernstein and Gershwin relied heavily on folk and popular sources. But for today's composers looking to infuse their music with the sound of today, Roumain says that immersion is even more crucial.

"You have to go to clubs," he says. "You have to be in a rock band. You can't assimilate and try to translate what happens in rock music to a string quartet unless you've done these things." His String Quartet No. 5 "Rosa Parks," for example, includes a percussionist who gets the audience to clap along in the final movement.

Perhaps Roumain takes his greatest inspiration from hip-hop disc jockeys, who literally blend music with their hands. "[They] have a wonderful way of instantly translating things that seem disconnected," he said.

Roumain even compares his instrumental technique to that of a turntable artist.

"My sound is a result of the techniques of not only Paganini but Prince and Grandmaster Flash," he says. "The scratching, the beating of the instrument -- those are things I got from nonviolin players."

Roumain looks even further afield for guidance in managing his business and life. Best-selling novelist Stephen King has been one model.

"I was reading some of his [auto]biographical writing, and he says he writes four hours a day," Roumain says. "That had a big impact on me -- I started doing that immediately."

Roumain's level of collaboration and management support allow for more than just greater penetration into the cultural marketplace. It also helps him maintain a certain level of sanity.

"There was a time in my life I could work from 8 a.m. to 2 in the morning, but that's unhealthy," he said. When he's not on the road, he knocks off at 8 p.m. But he always holds himself accountable.

"If you want to be successful, account for every hour of every day," he says. "That's a very clear practice -- coupled with ambition, goals and dreaming. Don't forget the dreaming."