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MUSIC REVIEW

Set to Electric Violin, Thoughts Posted on YouTube

By ALLAN KOZINN, Published: November 17, 2007



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Daniel Bernard Roumain in his 80-minute multimedia piece, "One Loss Plus," which explores losses both private and public.

Daniel Bernard Roumain has built his career so far on small-scale works, partly because the orchestral commissions a young composer gets tend to be for scores lasting less than 15 minutes, and partly because his pop hybrids — the "Hip-Hop Studies and Études," for example — demand concision. So his 80-minute multimedia piece, "One Loss Plus," which had its premiere at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Wednesday evening, is a technical and conceptual leap for him.

Mr. Roumain's idea was to explore loss in its most expansive form — that is, not simply personal, private loss, but loss of a more global variety as well, meaning anything from losses of freedoms and national or ethnic identity to the losses occasioned by war or sustained by the environment. Mr. Roumain invited people he knew and many he had never met (but who responded to a call for submissions) to record their responses to the theme of loss and post them on YouTube, or submit them as MP3 files.

The respondents do not confine themselves to loss. Several free-associate, making their way through the alphabet and suggesting words to match each letter. One recites the lyrics to "Frère Jacques." They provide a balm of sorts: part of the work is about moving forward, loss notwithstanding.

Works with lots of talking typically have a built-in problem: the talk almost inevitably distracts from the music. Even a composer as experienced as Steve Reich fell into that trap with "The Cave," in

which the discussion of a biblical text was often so interesting that it required effort to focus on the music as well.

In "One Loss Plus" the problem is the opposite: Mr. Roumain's music for electric violin (which he played), keyboard (played by Wynne Bennett) and electronic sound tended to be so involving that the spoken sections were often interruptions.

Mr. Roumain's eclecticism was wide-ranging as ever. Early in the score a Minimalist section, built on a repeating pizzicato violin and piano figure, gave way to more raucous bowed fiddling with a flourish borrowed from Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile (Slight Return)."

Other pop references came through layered electronic beats and a foot-stomping section in which Mr. Roumain seemed on the verge of asking the audience to join in. By contrast, high-flying violin passages throughout the score could have come from a Romantic concerto. Mr. Roumain was at his most original in long stretches of electronic music.

Janet Wong's arresting video combined speakers' faces; abstract, morphing images; Google maps; and occasionally text. And the lighting, by Matthew Richards, gave the production an element of mystery and drama.

The final performance of "One Loss Plus" is tonight at the Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; bam.org or (718) 636-4100.