

ST. CLOUD Times

Contemporary meets classic

By Jane Laskey • Special to the Times • February 17, 2011

COLLEGEVILLE — This is not going to be a typical night at the orchestra.

Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR) will join the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University Orchestra on Saturday in the Minnesota premiere of his "Club Dance Manifesto."

"It's really going to open up people's perceptions about what an orchestra can do," interim director Foster Beyers said. "It's somewhere between an orchestra concert and a rock concert."

DBR is a violinist, composer and band leader. With waist-length dreadlocks flying, he captivates audiences with his high-energy performances and unique compositions, weaving elements of classic, rock, hip-hop and funk music into a new sonic form.

"He takes all these dance rhythms and electronics and layers melodies one on top of the other," Beyers said. "It's a rhythmic language and a musical language that the students really relate to."

DBR roots

Roumain was born in Chicago, the son of Haitian Americans. He grew up in Florida where the folk songs of his parents' homeland collided with salsa rhythms and Miami bass.

By the time he was 5, Roumain was toting a violin case. Though he dearly loved his violin, it was not cool.

"At the time, the great love of my life was something that I was made to feel embarrassed and ashamed of so I had to find a way to make it cool, to make it relevant," Roumain said.

He began experimenting, moving away from the violin's melodic tradition to other sounds.

"I made it sound like a drum, a guitar, a flute, an electric guitar, a bass, a turntable. I'm still experimenting. It's my life's work," Roumain said.

Though Roumain was breaking new ground with his violin, he continued to pursue a classical path in his master's and doctoral work.

But the street sounds and folk songs of his childhood eventually found their way into his compositions.

"When I was in college, I started asking myself why all my music was melodious with a beautiful beat," Roumain said. "I realized it was like the music of Haiti and started combining classical music with Haitian folk songs."

Soon he was writing, playing and recording music that merged his disparate background into his own brand of music.

From New York's Carnegie Hall to Australia's Sydney Opera House to Washington, D.C.'s, Kennedy Center, DBR has won critical acclaim. He continues to explore ways to bridge classical and contemporary forms by collaborating with other artists.



Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR) will join the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University Orchestra on Saturday for a world premiere performance. (Photo courtesy of Julieta Cervantes)

The orchestra meets the dance floor

Saturday's concert at Escher Auditorium will begin with a nod to traditional orchestral fare with a performance of Copeland's "Hoe Down." But it quickly moves into two DBR compositions: "Club Dance Manifesto" and "Voodoo Violin Concerto No. 1."

In both, you hear an eclectic mix of styles and influences.

"You could probably take everything from Stravinsky to Jimi Hendrix out of his music," Beyers said. "He's also influenced by the school minimalism, so one movement might be influenced by Philip Glass while the next movement might be influenced by James Brown."

Roumain wrote "Club Dance Manifesto" after collaborating with Lady Gaga on "American Idol." It's a 20-minute piece that combines classical music with rapid rock beats, DJ scratches, electronics and funky bass lines.

"For years I'd been trying to combine dance music with orchestra music, but I wasn't getting close

enough,” Roumain said. “After collaborating with her, I started experimenting with the essential sonic elements. I’d sit in my room and experiment, then try them for my wife.”

“Voodoo Violin Concerto No. 1” is a 25-minute concerto for orchestra and violin. Inspired by DBR’s Haitian roots, it rides a wave of hip-hop and jazz beats. As the featured violin soloist, Roumain gives a virtuoso demonstration of what the instrument is capable of using his unique technique.

“He’s just a magician with a violin because he’s coming at the instrument with different goals,” Beyers said. “If you’re a conservatory violinist, you spend your whole life trying to get beautiful sounds out of your violin. He has more imagination about the sound palate he uses.”

The 65 members of the CSB/SJU orchestra have been working on DBR’s compositions since December. According to Beyers, both pieces are rhythmically very complex and require precise timing.

“I was shocked at how quickly the students grasped this music. It’s in their musical language and they understood the context of these rhythms immediately,” Beyers said. “... It gives them a chance to shine. Everybody in the orchestra has interesting parts to play.”

A musical conversation

“Club Dance Manifesto” was written as a part of DBR’s New Clef Coalition which he created to reach out to youth symphonies. The Coalition allows colleges and institutions like CSB/SJU to co-commission new works and share in the creative process and the creative costs.

CSB/SJU has a history of commissioning new works, according to Fine Arts Programming Director Brian Jose.

“We want our students to experience art that’s still alive, to be part of the creation of new work,” Brian Jose said. “It’s really the heart of creativity.”

DBR also will make a stop at the St. Cloud Boys & Girls Club where he will lead 20 children in a composition workshop.

“I always approach any kind of workshop as a conversation,” Roumain said. “... Everyone has a story to tell and if everyone has a chance to tell their story we will all benefit.”

Roumain likes to begin his workshops with a story of his own.

“My good Haitian mother would always tell me, ‘When you enter someone’s home, you bring something. You don’t go empty-handed,’” Roumain said. “I bring my violin and a story.”

As participants share their stories and music, the workshop’s outcome can be bigger than the sum of their individual experiences.

“The most interesting thing is that a 12-year-old can tell you something wonderful or something tragic that might make you rethink your life,” Roumain said. “I know my life will be better from having spent time with them.”

Roumain likes to leave students with one of his earliest musical memories. It was a comment his first music teacher, Mr. Miller, made when he was just 5 years old.

“He used to say, ‘Danny, you are always given a choice as a musician: to serve music or to have music served to you,’” Roumain said. “If you spend your life serving music then all the choices you make will be so much easier.”