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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

MAN ON A MISSION

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New York composer-violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain, who will premiere his String Quartet No. 4, "Angelou," Thursday at the 11th Other Minds Festival, has emerged as something of a hero in the demanding New York arts world. The New York Times put a Roumain performance at New York's Merkin Concert Hall at No. 3 on its list of Top 10 classical music events of 2003, and New York Resident Magazine named the 32-year-old composer one of the "Top 100 New Yorkers."

The reason for this acclaim is the range and quality of Roumain's often dramatic pieces, which frequently embrace modern musical genres such as hip-hop and electronica. An African American who frequently works issues of history and race into his work, Roumain is on a mission to make classical music relevant to young musicians.

As director of New York's Orchestra of St. Luke's Young Composers Development Program, Roumain points out to his students the commonalities between classical and contemporary music. The fact that he's as comfortable performing in an East Village nightclub with his hip-hop band, DBR's Mission, as working with major symphony orchestras doesn't hurt his credibility.

"Young people are already listening to very sophisticated music," Roumain says by phone from his home in Harlem. "Hip-hop music, rock music and electronica, these really have a lot going on. If you do a musical analysis of that music, and I have, you'll find that, on a rhythmic level, it's exceedingly complex. It's contrapuntal music. It's an easy sell, once you start demonstrating that. And Eminem and Bach are using the same scales. So young people come equipped with all the listening and analytical skills they need to appreciate classical music."

Once you start looking, you find Roumain everywhere. He performs with jazz singer Cassandra Wilson and saxophonist David S. Ware. He premiered his "Rockestra, a Hip-Hop Music and Dance Party" during his residency at Arizona State University last year. His "Haitian Essay for Orchestra" was performed by the St. Louis Symphony. The San Antonio Symphony performed his "Human Songs and Stories for Orchestra, Narrator and the People." His residency at New York City's Tribeca Performing Arts Center has included the performance of his hip-hop musical "Lenox Avenue." And he's the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's music director.

String Quartet No. 4, "Angelou," commissioned by the Other Minds Festival with support from the San Francisco Arts Commission, is a characteristic Roumain piece, fusing classical and modern musical elements. The chamber music, performed by the local Del Sol String Quartet, is dedicated to the life and work of poet and activist Maya Angelou. As the strings play, Roumain and musical collaborator DJ Scientific will use laptops to sample voice clips, and Roumain will overlay lines on his electric violin.

"We're using Maya Angelou's voice, with excerpts we've collected from interviews and talks, and treating it almost like a musical instrument," he says. "Deconstructing it and manipulating it, rendering it well beyond what you might even recognize as her voice."

It was Angelou's civil rights work, rather than her poetry, that inspired the piece.

"All of my string quartets deal with leaders from the civil rights era," Roumain says. "The first one is a depiction of Malcolm X, the second Martin Luther King Jr. and the third Adam Clayton Powell. Important black men. Then I said, 'Well, there were great important black women.' When you start to do the research, you realize that Maya Angelou knew all these men. ... This quartet and the next two will be about the women of the movement."

Roumain, whose parents are Haitian, was born and raised in southern Florida. His elementary school had an orchestra, and he became transfixed by the violins.

"There were so many cultures in southern Florida, so much different music, and my father listened to everything," he says. "I didn't know there was anything remarkable about a young African American child being drawn to classical music. It was just another music to me."

Roumain says his growth as a person and as a musician can be traced through his string quartets.

"The first one, let's see," he muses. "A young black man, early 20s, is going to write a string quartet about Malcolm X. You can imagine, right? Loud, fast, dissonant, angry. Nine minutes of fury. I was an angry black man, and I wanted the world to know it."

"So I get a little older and move to New York. String Quartet No. 2, King, 45 minutes, five movements, not as angry. It's very tonal and it's a big work."

"Powell is almost a combination of the two. It's about 20 minutes long, dealing much more with hip-hop and rock music. I think in some ways it's very much like Harlem."

"Those works are sort of masculine, for lack of a better word. The Angelou piece is different. A lot of quiet moments. A very romantic piece."

"I was trying to understand Maya Angelou as she is right now. She was angry, she was extroverted, she was more Isaac Hayes than Isaac Hayes. But, you know, you get older, you get a little wiser. You don't have to speak as loudly. So now you just want to think about legacy, maybe. What are you leaving behind? How will you be remembered? I don't know. I'm not her age. It's hard for me to think that way. But I am now 32 and thinking about thinking that way. It's an important maturation process."

DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN: The composer's String Quartet No. 4, "Angelou," will be performed at 8 p.m. Thursday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. Also on the program will be selections from "The Piano," "Manhatta" silent film accompaniment, String Quartet No. 3 and "The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi," all by Michael Nyman; and Phill Niblock's "Sethwork," a piece for guitars with e-bow, with projected films. A composer panel discussion will be at 7 p.m.