

'Past eclecticism'

Composer/performer to explore intersection of hip-hop and chamber music, at DeBartolo

By Karen Rivers, Tribune Staff Writer



Daniel Bernard Roumain, seated on floor, is a violinist and composer who mixes classical, rock, funk and hip-hop music. Also known as DBR, Roumain will perform at the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts today with his ensemble. THE MISSION.

Daniel Bernard Roumain is a composer. He is a performer. He's a violinist, a pianist, and band leader, and a "laptopist". He's a purveyor of funk, rock, hip-hop and classical music. He declares himself "a proud member of the iPod generation," always living his life on shuffle.

Forget postmodern. He calls this era "post eclecticism."

Today, Roumain and his eight-piece ensemble, known as DBR & THE

MISSION, play the University of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts, where they will present the world premiere of Roumain's work "24 Bits Hip-Hop Studies & Etudes, Book 1", in its entirety.

At least that's the plan.

"I hope we get through it all. We'll definitely get through a lot of it," he says with a laugh, calling from his home in New York City.

"24 Bits" is a series of 24 short musical vignettes, one in each key, that explain, examine and express different aspects of hip-hop music.

If they get to only 18 today, he promises a sincere apology.

Roumain has been playing the violin since he was 5 years old and has a Ph.D. in music from the University of Michigan. As for THE MISSION, Roumain describes them as "very diverse," "very young," "virtuosic" and "some of the best freelance musicians in New York City".

He couldn't do what he does without them – and, he adds, some of the guys are even better at head-banging while playing the violin than he is.

Together, the nine musicians put on what Roumain calls "rock-show-meets-chamber-music".

For this 35-year-old, combining classical and contemporary music into "24 Bits" wasn't necessarily about proving a point or making collage just for collage's sake. It was a natural expression of what he's all about.

"I'm a product of everything I've ever experienced – we all are. Of course, (this piece) totally makes sense. I'm honoring classical. I'm honoring funk.

George Clinton and George Gershwin hand in hand," he says.

As for doing it key by key – that's a composer thing.

"We like to do things systematically," he says.

The method did present him with a number of challenges. (Try doing something funky in D major; it's not easy.) The end result, however, is a piece that he hopes will get the audience talking: Is this hip-hop? Is it classical?

"I would like people to leave with unanswered questions... I want people to have a sense of urgency," he says. "Composers – we're desperate people. We're desperate to have our music heard."

To be a young composer in this day and age is sometimes frustrating, Roumain says. More often, however, he simply feels fortunate to be doing what he does. Roumain believes, very strongly, that music saved his life, and he's proud to be a part of today's classical landscape.

"How many young black men do you know that write music for a living? Not pop music, but for an orchestra," he asks.

"Here I am out there with my violin and my drum kit and my DJ, not only trying to create original music, but an original experience... Sometimes, I feel like a soldier – and I'm fighting to represent."

More than anything, Roumain strives to create a "collective energy" at his shows. He doesn't care if people cheer or boo, as long as they're involved. And after the show, he definitely plans to linger. If you loved something or hated something – either way, he'd like to know.