

An odd couple transcends generations

Composers Glass and Roumain form mutual admiration society

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CLASSICAL

Information and entertainment give you infotainment. A guess and estimate become a guesstimate. A camera and recorder make a camcorder.

But what happens when you mix composer Philip Glass, senior statesman of Minimalists, and Daniel Bernard Roumain, the self-styled "Dred Violinist," whose works blend hip-hop, funk and rock with classical?

That's what audiences this weekend can find out, when the two give a rare concert together, just one of a handful they've done since they met eight years ago. Glass will play his Solo Etudes for piano, then Roumain, or DBR, will play his "24 bits: Hip-Hop Studies and Etudes" for piano, inspired by Glass' work. Then, with DBR switching to his trademark violin, they will perform a few works together, some by Glass, some by Roumain.

"We accept that there is about 35 years difference in our age and influences," says Glass, who first heard DBR play on a concert he produced of young composers. "The common ground is music, melody, rhythm and harmony. His musical instincts are immediately obvious. And I enjoy his enthusiasm and determination."

For Roumain, the respect is mutual. "The association is wonderful. Phil has drawn from pop and rock, I've drawn from hip-hop. He's an important mentor and teacher to me, and the most important thing he's taught me is don't give up, never."

Admiration, though, does not necessarily mean comprehension. "I'm not even sure I know completely what hip-hop is -- it's a word still finding a name for itself," says Glass. "He plays violin and calls it hip-hop -- I hear it could be a combination of blues and Stravinsky. Our historical and social roots are different -- he comes from Harlem, I come from a working-class family in Baltimore -- but we both have formal training."

But unlike Glass, who famously drove taxicabs to make ends meet until his music gained acceptance, Roumain, who has a doctorate from the University of Michigan, seems to have emerged fully formed into classical and pop culture.

"I think it's my job as a black composer to say, 'I know you've heard the lyrics and the controversies, now look at the complex music underneath,'" Roumain says. Hip-hop, he maintains, "is a contrapuntal exercise, a line against a line ... like a cake."

His music (www.dbrmusic.com to sample some) includes two string quartets, a dozen or so orchestral works, a handful of vocal works -- and lots of solo violin pieces, which are the heart of his expressive voice. He is music director of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, composer in residence with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and performs and records with his own band, The Mission (at the Knitting Factory on Thursday).

Roumain also shares Glass' curiosity about different musical forms.

"I'm the iPod generation; I'm listening to everything," he says. "The name of the game is, can I apply hip-hop rhythm techniques to a string quartet and do it in a way that is valid, not watered down? I don't think the world needs a Symphony No. 10 by DBR, but I do think it needs a hip-hop essay for orchestra. It's a calling."

For Glass, who plans to release a joint recording with DBR on his record label, Orange Mountain (www.orangemountainmusic.com), Roumain "re-ignites my own interest in music."

"The older people have to help the younger people, to reach down and bring them into the circle of active music-making," Glass says.