

DBR teaches ABZs of classical experimentation

By Diana Nollen. Updated November 10, 2007 1:05PM

IOWA CITY — Mission accomplished.

Anchored by works from "24 Bits: Hop-Hop Studies and Etudes," DBR and the Mission's concert Friday night at Hancher Auditorium was a learning experience.

Etudes are designed as teaching tools for instrumentalists to practice a certain technique. Daniel Bernard Roumain's etudes also teach his listeners.

He takes his classical roots, stands them on their ends, and injects hip-hop, electronics, scratching, hard rock and more personality than you could ever imagine. Mozart is sitting on a cloud somewhere, applauding.

Roumain doesn't just push the envelope on classical experimentation, he rips it open, stuffs the contents in a shredder and tosses the confetti into the air to shower his audiences in an experience they've never had watching chamber orchestras perform.

The beauty is that even though his musicians appear casual in jeans it's immediately clear how serious they are about their artistry, how sophisticated they are in technique and how happy they are to be making this music.

Jessie Reagen was the first to catch my eye as she joyously tossed her blond curls while bowing her cello. Serious musicians so often have such serious looks on their faces that it's always a pleasure when their physical expression mirrors their musical expression.

One by one, the other eight members of the ensemble let their smiles and posture reflect their fun.

This chamber group has the elements you expect: three violins, viola, bass, percussion and piano, but the bass is electric, the percussion a drum kit and the piano most often an electronic keyboard. Add to the mix a DJ with dance club turntables, laptop and beatbox — all playing

against a pulsating rainbow of color — and you know we're not in Kansas anymore.

They etudes are designed to be musical vignettes, each in a different key. One sounds like an orchestra tuning before the drum lays down the rhythm and the others join in to create a dissonant wash of sound over a heavy backbeat. Another was anchored by the plucking of the viola in a hypnotic monotony before ending with a lovely solo line. The next piece felt like a mysterious, exotic gypsy dance. One of the more wild pieces was influenced by the music of Korn, with a hard-driving beat that had all the string players banging their heads by the end.

The loveliest piece was an ode to a dying dog named Jack, sending his soul on a mournful, yet glorious journey to the next life, with the sound spiraling to the uppermost sounds Roumain could evoke on his violin. It was beautiful, respectful and melodic.

The evening's most classical sounding piece featured a delicate dance between Roumain on violin and Yayoi Ikawa on the grand piano. It, too, faded brilliantly to silence, broken only by the ringing of a cell phone in front of me.

Even that annoyance can't diminish the fun rippling through the 590 people in attendance. Some stood and danced in their rows, one young couple danced in front of the stage, and all around me, people of all ages were dancing in their seats.

My favorite piece of the evening came near the end of the two-hour show, in an exercise Roumain called "controlled improvisation." The score shows the musicians when and where they play, but he said what they play is up to them. What they produced was an otherworldly sound of sighing winds, the cacophony of traffic and sirens, billowing to the sound of rockets blasting to outer space.

The entire evening was over the moon.