

Roumain brings wide mix of influences to double string quartet

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By Channing Gray
Journal Arts Writer

One of the highlights of the FirstWorks Festival is the unveiling of a world premiere composition by violinist Daniel Bernard Roumain tomorrow night at the RISD Auditorium.



Composer Daniel Bernard Roumain grew up playing Brahms and Beethoven on the violin. But he takes much of his inspiration these days from jazz, rock, hip-hop and his Haitian roots. That will become apparent when the 37-year-old musician unveils his new double string quartet and performs tunes from his latest album this weekend at the Rhode Island School of Design Auditorium.

The show is part of the FirstWorks Festival.

Roumain's *Kompa Variations*, which will be performed for the first time tomorrow night at 8, was commissioned by and written for the Providence String Quartet, resident ensemble of the Community MusicWorks program, which offers free lessons to students in Providence's inner city. It is scored for two string quartets, one a professional outfit and the other made up of teenage students of Providence Quartet members.

The commission came about after Roumain met with Providence String Quartet violist Sebastian Ruth. Roumain was in town for last year's FirstWorks Festival, as resident composer for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Ruth and Roumain have known one another for a while

and started talking about working together. Roumain wrote a grant proposal for the group and that resulted in funding for the project.

“I’ve been a fan of Community MusicWorks for years,” said Roumain in a phone call from Lexington, Mass., where he spends part of his time. “It was one of those things where an acquaintance turned into a friendship into a collaboration and a commission.”

What Roumain has written amounts to a “virtuosic” piece in two parts, each containing seven long variations. The 20-minute score is based on a form of Haitian pop music called kompa.

“It’s re-imagining the worldwide possibilities of Haitian music,” he said. “It’s a real exploration of what Haitian-American music is in 2008.

Roumain, who sports a silver nose ring and dreadlocks that spill down to his waist, grew up in South Florida, but both his parents are from Haiti, and that has had a strong influence on his work.

He said he developed his signature style while a senior at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. That was in 1993, when he was commissioned by the school’s resident quartet to write a musical portrait of black leader Malcolm X. He has since written four more string quartets inspired by iconic civil rights leaders.

“A lot of things in that piece pointed toward this hybrid style of mine,” said Roumain, “between what I now know as Haitian music, African and American rock and soul and hip-hop. It’s black soul music with a kind of European persuasion.”

Besides the Kompa Variations, Roumain will be heard in compositions for violin, piano and a beat-boxing turntable with DJ Scientific. There will also be selections from his *etudes4violin&electronix* album.

“It’s all chamber music with electronics and soundscapes for the violin as the principle solo voice,” he said.

Roumain said the two works nearest to his heart right now are the variations for double quartet and a new work called Darwin’s Meditation for the People of Lincoln, a musical setting of an imagined encounter between naturalist Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln, who were born hours apart on Feb. 12, 1809. He just premiered the work in Illinois and will be performing it at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival at the end of the month.

“This is good, honest, blue-collar music with no gimmicks,” he said

Daniel Bernard Roumain performs tomorrow night at 8 at the RISD Auditorium, 17 Canal Walk. Tickets are \$18. Call (401) 421-4278 or log on to www.first-works.org.