



# Man on a mission

COMPOSER DANIEL BERNARD ROUMAIN MERGES CLASSICAL MUSIC WITH HIP HOP, SOUL AND OTHER GENRES, USING LAPTOPS AND DJS ALONG THE WAY. FEMKE COLBORNE FINDS OUT MORE

**W**hen asked to name one of the greatest chamber musicians of modern times, most musically educated people would probably come up with something like the Lindsays; the Takács Quartet; players from the Beaux-Arts trio.

But Snoop Dogg? Yes – according to contemporary and progressive composer Daniel Bernard Roumain (DBR), the Benz-driving, gang-banging king of bling is one of the most skilled chamber musicians to have graced the earth in recent years.

‘He uses the hocket technique – the technique of passing along a melodic idea between voices or groups of voices,’ explains DBR. ‘And in his collaborations with other artists – from the early stuff with Dr Dre to the work with bands like the Neptunes – he always finds a way to blend in and not dominate the track. He uses his voice like a violin in a string quartet; that mix of dominating and complimenting is exactly like in chamber music.’ When you put it like that, it doesn’t sound so crazy.

This is the kind of approach that makes the 33-year-old from south Florida an unusual kind of composer. Even from the outset, on sight of his flowing dreadlocks and baggy slacks, it is clear that DBR is playing with conventional definitions – not least of what it means to be a composer. Although classically trained (he graduated from the University of Michigan with a doctorate in composition), he and his nine-piece band DBR & The Mission combine classical

formats with funk, rock, hip hop and live DJs on stage, and he has written a series of classical pieces, *Hip Hop Studies and Etudes*, to be performed on piano and laptop.

‘Especially in classical music there’s a resistance to change – you’re not supposed to have a DJ playing with a string quartet. But that’s slowly changing,’ he believes. ‘I was classically trained but I always played in bands and worked with DJs too. It was like having two separate lives – for a long time I kept them separate because I thought I was supposed to. But then I realized the two compliment each other and can transform one another.’

Having been classically trained, does he now feel that he is going in more of a ‘pop’ direction? ‘I’m going in a completely new direction,’ is the answer. ‘There’s the classical side but also hip hop, jazz, soul – it’s a fairly complex soup I’m making. My parents are from Haiti – when you’re from the Caribbean you’re gonna use a lot of different spices!’

DBR has written works for various unusual combinations of instruments. His latest work *String Quartet No 4 – Angelou* for string quartet, turntables and laptop is the most recent addition to an ongoing series of works dedicated to leaders from the civil rights era. Other projects include *Vision Blinding*, a solo show for violin, video and voice, and *Blind Date* – a large scale work involving multiple video installations, a classical violinist, two singers and dancers conceived as part of DBR’s

role as music director of the New York-based Bill T Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

As for his band, DBR & The Mission – a nine-piece outfit including amplified string quartet, drum kit, keyboard, vocals, DJ and laptops – they are taking his legacy even further, having recently been signed to a management deal with ICM Artists. ‘If we start to reach more people and get more bookings than that would be great,’ he says. ‘Is that ego? Partly, but I also believe that what I’m doing is important. Maybe I’m very naïve but I do think what we do is like missionary work – to reach people and challenge them. That’s why the band is called The Mission.’

DBR has collaborated with many dance artists including DJs Spooky and Radar, but a particular highlight of his career so far has been a series of performances alongside composer Philip Glass. ‘It was a dream come true,’ he says. ‘I’ve always been an admirer of his music and his career. He’s a very good friend – he’s very humble, very compassionate.’

It turns out that DBR went to a Glass concert the night before our interview: ‘I was purposefully looking at the audience to see who was there. There were young and old people, black and white – at a concert like that the range is so broad. Some people come to see the string quartet, some come to see the DJ – and they end up sitting side by side and having conversations.’

This seems like a good example of what DBR is trying to do with his music: to merge genres and audiences that have previously inhabited diametrically opposed worlds. ‘When I was at Michigan there was a professor in his 80s and I played him one of my compositions based on hip hop. He really enjoyed it,’ he boasts. ‘And he hadn’t listened to any hip hop at all.’

DBR has previously referred to Eminem as a ‘great melodist’: ‘Sure! He uses melodies and scales in the same way Bach did,’ he confirms. ‘I can’t think of one Eminem song that doesn’t have a great melody as the structure of the song – not just the tune but as the base of the song. And he has a way of rapping that has a real melodic quality to it. Like a lot of successful composers, he’s very aware of the importance of a great melody – at the end of the day that’s what it comes down to. Lots of the most successful artists today realize that: Dido and Keane are good examples.’

It’s a refreshing approach, but one that is difficult to imagine the other way around: let’s face it, Dr Dre hailing John Adams as one of the greatest gangsters of the 21st century would be unlikely to do his bad-ass reputation many favors. But DBR is full of hope that music itself is stronger and more powerful than the preconceptions that stop it from being heard or accepted: ‘This is a great time for music,’ he asserts enthusiastically. ‘There’s a revolt going on – a real revolution of creativity.’ ■