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Daniel Bernard Roumain, Resident Artist Catalyst at the New Jersey Symphony, on Black Classical Music, Hip- Hop, and The Newark Museum of Art's Summer Concert Series

Transcript

Podcast by Christopher Benincasa

CB:

This is Chris Benincasa for the JerseyArts podcast. Earlier this week, composer, performer, educator activist, and New Jersey Symphony, resident artistic catalyst, Daniel Bernard remain brought jazz and jazz-inspired classical music to the Newark Museum's Summer Series. Romaine has worked with lady Gaga, Philip Glass, Savion Glover, bill T Jones, and many more. He won an Emmy for composing music per ESPN, and he scored the film Ailey, a documentary about legendary choreographer, Alvin Ailey, which premiered at Sundance film festival. Last year. Here's a clip from a video that was produced about romaine and his philosophy about his work.

DBR:

As an artist entrepreneur, I really am committed to creating projects that speak to social injustice has something to say about racial and cultural identity. And in many ways, I'm trying to figure out how are we all going to live together? I have throughout my career worked with DJs, laptopists, iPads, choreographers, dancers, spoken word artists. I've worked in film, television, in modern dance, ballet, and I'm always wanting to find out how I can learn and create something new.

When I go into the classroom as an educator, I'm thinking about a conversation. I think for me, love has to do with service and how I can serve any community I want to do good. It's a simple thing. I want to do well and I want to be, I want to be real.

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We recently had a chat with romaine about the Newark Museum of Art summer concert series. The third to last one of the season is tonight as well as Black classical music and the ever-expanding world of hip-hop. So last year you became the New Jersey symphony resident artistic catalyst. Please tell us about this role. What is it and how has your experience living in that role been like for you so far?

DBR:

Oh, I like how you said that — living in this role — it's so important. Um, well, it's been, it's been a gift. It's a blessing, you know, to be a Black/Haitian American composer, um, who is working and in collaboration, uh, with the great New Jersey Symphony, it's been one of the big honors of my life. It's been a wonderful collaboration. Uh, just a few hours ago. I was working with the woodwind, uh, woodwind quintet and a brass quintet drawn from the orchestra, playing music by Paquito D'Rivera, the great Grammy Award-winning composer and clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera and myself. And, um, you know, we're in conversation, we're in collaboration, we're in conversation. Um, it's, it's been really remarkable and, um, you know, the collaboration has so much depth to it. So everything from conversations that involve, um, one or a handful of musicians, uh, working with the staff that are excellent, and that's not the right word, I just, you know, the word staff is too small, but that's, that's another conversation, um, working with of course, our great maestro and, Xian Zhang, um, working with other guest artists appearing as a soloist in my own violin concerto with the entire orchestra, which is, um, you know, well over 65 members strong, um, being able to engage with the audience, not only an NJPAC, but around the state of New Jersey, um, being able to work with very young people in school concerts and programming that we're getting back to, of course, doing things online as we are still coming out of coming out of this, this iteration of the pandemic.

Yeah, it's been, it's been very broad, very, um, strategic, uh, very loving to tell you the truth. Um, I feel that I'm at home, um, with colleagues that, um, hear me and see me and respect me and want me <laugh> want me around and, and are interested in my ideas about, um, music making and community building. So yeah, I'm, uh, it's a two year engagement and I'm halfway through. And, um, I'm, um, as much as I'm already thinking about when this great kind of dream ends, I'm also keen on our upcoming season, the work that I'll be doing, uh, and continuing in this role and just how fortunate I am to, um, to be able to have this, this position at this time. Um, I'm just really, really grateful and really happy for it. And, and also I think the other thing that's important to mention is that I I'm able to program other composers, um, and, um, other artists, um, some of whom are, are not all, but some are who are BIPOC and, and, um, or identify as being nonbinary, um, artists who aren't always heard or seen. Um, that's been really important part of, of, of my job and my responsibility here. And it's something that the New Jersey Symphony by the way has always done and is just doing more of.

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You are known for many things. And one of them is combining classical music with jazz hip-hop and rock. How do you do that?

DBR:

Well, um, you know, my models, I've had a lot of different musical models of my life, everyone from Prince to Philip Glass, to Bjork to, um, John Adams, to John Tower, to, um, Joni Mitchell, the great Joni Mitchell to Nina Simone. If you think about all of those artists, they were all doing very similar things in terms of combining music from different genres, um, different sounds different, um, disciplines into a singular volatile musical voice. So, uh, I'm not the only one, certainly, who has within their classical musical language elements of rock or jazz, hip-hop, you know, so on and so forth. So, um, the way you do that is I think, or, or I should say the, at least the way that I did it is, um, I early on was starting to, you know, very young, I mean, I was 12, 13 years old. I was playing in bands. I started playing electric instruments, um, early, and, you know, my first, well in, in high school actually, um, I started working I'm from south Florida. So I, I interned and then later, um, was in the studio and doing different things with literally artists, 2 Live Crew, um, and also interning and, and, um, really having different collaborations with the Florida, Philharmonic, you know, while I was in high school. So I just took the things that I was doing that I loved, which was namely classical music and hip-hop music and combined them. And I think the way that you do that is you first have to be steeped in, in these disciplines. You have to actually play them and perform within these genres, and I still do, you know, I still work a lot with dancers and DJ's, and I've also, I've always been, um, hyper-collaborative like Prince, like Philip Glass, like Bjork, like Joni Mitchell. Joni Mitchell worked with Charles Mingus and was as much of a folk singer as she was, uh, well, as much as a jazz singer as she was a folk singer. Right. So, um, same thing with Nina Simone, who took literally, uh, jazz music and combined it with her love for classical music, namely Bach. So, um, yeah, I think that the, the artists, I most admire have always been eclectic, hyper-eclectic, and, um, well, to put it succinctly, I, I think there's, there's essentially two things that you do. You start playing that music that you love with other people, and you really learn it and understand it. And then you can, um, because these are valid, um, valuable musical languages. You can then in some ways translate what they do for classical instruments. Uh, so whether it's an orchestra or a string quartet, you're, you're using rock music, those rhythms, and those chords you're using hip-hop music, those rhythms, and those chords within your own, uh, musical language.

CB:

You have such a unique take on music. Uh, how do you define hip-hop? Or if you don't want to get into definitions, what do you love about hip-hop?

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DBR:

Hip-hop music is an ever expanding country. You know, it's, it's actually a continent at this point. You can think of it that way. It's a continent now that has different countries in it all with their own roles, ever expanding. You know, you can almost think of it as <laugh>, I guess, sorry to take that analogy a little further, um, there's, there's probably a hip-hop planet that has multiple continents and multiple countries that, and they're all expanding, you know, in a hyper way, all at the same time. I mean, it's boundless, you know, hip-hop music is boundless. And, um, at this point it's very hard to define what hip-hop music is, because it has so many different, um, like, like a, like different countries, different languages, different representatives, different tastes and styles, um, different wants and needs, different values, even. And, um, that's really exciting.

DBR:

I can think of no other music, certainly no other music in America that has this kind of rapid, constant evolution and constant change and constant expansion, ever enveloping, ever welcoming. You know, you don't need a passport just come in. And, um, I think hip-hop music has and remained incredibly complex and sophisticated, you know, and there was a, like any, anything that's evolved, there was a time when it was, there were very specific rules and it was much more narrow and it was just much more, um, it, it was smaller if you will, right. But now it's, it's grown. It expanded. There are millions of hip-hop artists, millions. And by that, I mean, sure, there are some that are well known, but I tell you throughout the world, if there's, um, a young person somewhere, they are, probably just go online and you'll see it, they are probably creating their own brand of hip-hop music. They're creating their own, um, rules of engagement and rules around it. And, uh, they're creating their own experiences, you know, with it. And that's, that's extremely exciting. And you name any, any country on this planet they probably have, or know the young people there, in particular, I should say, probably have, or know their favorite hip-hop artists, you know, indeed there are, there are people in the world who don't speak any English at all, who can recite line by line word by word hits by B.I.G. and hits by Drake, you know, so, um, with all of that, um, I do think this is my personal take, that there is Black music. And by that, I mean, it's not, so it's not about race so much. Um, it's about, um, a style and sound and, um, a fundamental and for me, um, black music, um, um, has a kind of, um, identity that is obvious and intentional, and oftentimes as steeped in essential black American musical forms, namely rock, jazz, and hip-hop, and, um, those essential forms, um, give the foundation upon which a myriad of individual musical styles and voices, um, you know, can be heard and can, can be shared.

CB:

You use the term Black classical music. Could you unpack that?

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DBR:

When I say Black classical music, I'm saying I'm a black, I, for me that means I'm a black composer who is using rock, jazz and hip-hop as a music, as a set of musical fundamentals upon which I'm creating my own music. And that means specifically that my music as a black composer doesn't sound like, uh, European or Eastern European concert music. I'm not using dodecaphonic procedures. I'm not trying to sound like, um, Arvo Pärt or Schoenberg <laugh> or Philip Glass for that matter. Right? That's what I mean by that. And, and I, and I, I mean, no offense to my other black colleagues and friends who either don't agree with me or aren't doing what I'm doing. I'm just very like, like a lot of rocket musicians in a way. I'm very adamant and defiant about the fact that I don't wanna sound, I don't want my Black classical music to sound white. You dig?

CB:

I do.

DBR:

I dunno why I'm like hedging a little bit, but yeah. You know, I I'm, I'm, I'm very clear in, in what I'm doing and what I'm doing is so clearly Black classical music, because it's so clearly drawn from black American musical forums. And, and it's a thing, you know, I mean, uh, you know, there's so many ways to make music within classical music, and I think that's amazing take Paquito D'Rivera — his music is so clearly based in, in Afro Cuban forums and Latino forums. Right. It's so clearly has a distinctive style that is born of his, of his, um, roots, his Latin roots, his Cuban roots, his Puerto Rican roots, his Spanish roots. Right? Um, it so clearly represents his culture in the music, and this is a woodwind quintet! What?! You know, there are moments of salsa and there are moments of salsa chords, and it sounds like the musicians are improvising in and around them. It's incredible. And, um, yeah, it's remarkable and clear and I would call it a kind of musical vernacular, you know? Yeah. So that's exciting to me.

CB:

There are three more concerts in the series. One is tonight. Fresh off this week's performance, can you tell us what audiences can expect from this series?

DBR:

It's, it's a place where I have found it's so summer, right? It's not just summer, it's SO summer, it's SO summer. By that, I mean, you got those trees and that concrete path and the grass that is right there, it's a lawn, if you will. And all of it, um, is, is outside, you know, as the sun is preparing to, to, um, set,

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um, you've got about two hours of light where it's not too hot, but it's warm. And, um, it's breezy. And, um, particularly now that we've eased the, uh, COVID restrictions to allow us to bring in food and drink, um, it allows us to share, um, a meal with one another to break bread with the person next to you, which I think are so important, um, it's community. And, um, it, it, that's why it's so wondrous, you know? I would even say you hear birds and you hear airplanes and you hear insects and you hear motorcycles, you hear the world. That doesn't go away. And if anything, the music that we're making there, although it's amplified, it's in, um, a kind of collaboration with the sounds of Newark, sometimes ferocious and even interruptive, I think in a really cool way, but also, I think, a reminder, um, that we are not first responders. The New Jersey Symphony, we are not first responders. We're not EMTs, we're not firefighters, we're not law enforcement. We're not the people who are out there every day, even during our concert saving lives, right? In some cases, breathing life into someone, um, who is fighting for their life. We're not first responders, but as I like to say, can we be second or third or fourth? Can we respond to the needs of the day? Can we be a part of the healing process? And can we do it in a space that is natural, that is forgiving, that is reflective and unique, um, to the sound and soil of the people who make the space. Like the best picnic you can ever imagine or remember, it's a time to sit back and relax and just listen and look up at the sky. And I would say, thank the universe, um, that we're alive and we're together. And it's, you know, this was an experiment last summer. It was a response to, you know, not being able to do concerts inside. So this has, I hope, I hope it becomes an annual event. So far, so good.

CB:

Daniel Bernard Romaine, thank you so much for doing the podcast.

DBR:

Thank you, brother. My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

CB:

The Newark Museum of Art's summer concert series continues August 6 at 7 p.m. *with Simply Simone: the Music of Nina Simone*, and there are two more concerts after that, August 11th, *A Night of Jazz and Soul with Patience Higgins and the Sugar Hill Quartet*, and August 17th *Bass & Flute Extravaganza*. For more information, go to newarkmuseumart.org. If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe and tell your friends. A transcript of this podcast links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at jerseyarts.com. The JerseyArts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show was co-founded by and is currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National

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