

Paganini to Prince: Daniel Bernard Roumain makes violin cool

By LISA GUTIERREZ

No delusions here. Daniel Bernard Roumain knows what most kids think about the violin.

“Not very cool, not very cool at all,” he said once to a group of high school musicians. “Bass guitar, cool. Drum kit, cool. Electric guitar, cool. When I was growing up — violin? Not cool.”

Yet Roumain, in Kansas City this week to work with young musicians, knows the instrument he’s been playing since he was 5 can conjure Prince or Paganini.

The violin cool? Roumain played with Lady Gaga while she sang “Poker Face” on “American Idol.”

The classically trained composer/performer is known as a hip-hop violinist because of his classical compositions built on hip-hop beats.

Before he sheared off his trademark, waist-length dreadlocks two years ago (he needed a change), he called his music “dred violin,” his house blend of classical, jazz, hip-hop and rock.

That’s him on one of his YouTube videos shredding a violin — he owns more than 30 — like he’s running with the devil, or Eddie Van Halen.

When he’s not collaborating with an orchestra or chamber ensemble (the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra, symphonies in St. Louis and Dallas) or working with the likes of noted minimalist composer Philip Glass, he’s teaching.

He spends quite a bit of his time revving up the next generation. This month he’s been artist-in-residence with the New Haven Symphony Orchestra, performing across Connecticut and teaching school children, college students and townfolk the ways of the violin.

So how does he sell it to kids who know Beyonce way better than Bach? In his travels he meets kids who have never heard, seen or touched a violin, let alone heard one played live, one of the first things he does for them. He lets them hold a violin, feel it in their hands, play the open strings.

Then he shows them the relationships between classical music and the stuff they’ve downloaded onto their iPods, how Eminem writes music using the same music scale as Bach and how basic elements of classical composition are even hidden in Public Enemy and Justin Timberlake songs.

“I compete with other instruments by plugging in and amplifying” the violin, he said during a phone interview from his Boston-area home. “And anybody can do that. There are a lot of people doing that.

“There are a lot of kids who are also doing that. A violin plugged into a guitar amplifier has a lot of appeal. And in some ways, the sound is similar to a guitar.

“That is part of my work quite frankly, to use your term, to make the violin sexy and make it hospitable and attractive. You’re not going to reach everyone. But I definitely think things are much better than when I was a young boy ... now

you’ve got hip-hop violinists and rock violinists and all types of violinists. And it’s great.”

Last year was the first time Kansas Citians got to hear Roumain perform while he was in town teaching students in the University of Missouri-Kansas City’s Musical Bridges program for young urban musicians.

He lit such a fire under the students — and got them sounding pretty darn good in just a few hours — that UMKC brought him back this week to work again with the students and perform at a fundraiser Friday night.

“He makes music accessible, but it’s still challenging,” said program director Mara Gibson.

Musical Bridges began in 2007 with seven students. This year, 50 middle and high school students are taking free, weekly, one-on-one lessons from conservatory faculty members and graduate students.

More than half the students enrolled are from the Kansas City, Kan., school district, the rest from the Kansas City and Hickman Mills districts.

“I think musical bridges is apropos to how I’m trying to live my life,” Roumain said. “I want to build bridges that speak to my generation and those that are coming.

“You give to your children all that you can because you expect them to run away from you, to go that much further.”

Gibson watched Roumain work with the students last year and said that “he’s charismatic and puts music on a level that doesn’t seem like a high art.”

Born to Haitian parents and raised in South Florida, Roumain started playing violin when he was 5 because “they were offering it at school.” He loved its many voices.

“I’m influenced by Paganini, I’m influenced by Prince, I’m influenced by Jimmy Hendrix, I’m influenced by Stravinsky,” said Roumain, who has a doctorate in musical composition from the University of Michigan.

“I think, like a lot of composers, I’m drawing from everything that’s out there and making it my own.”

The “dizzying array of music being put out there” he said, makes these exciting times for young classical musicians and composers, increasingly sophisticated in their use of nontraditional instruments, from iPads to iPhones.

And that’s just fine with him, though he knows that ruffles traditionalist feathers in the classical music family.

“You know, we could probably make the argument that children don’t know their major scales as well as they did in the ‘50s, ‘60s, ‘70s. Who cares?” he said. “A major scale is about as relevant as Mitch Miller now.

“But I think that we as a dying and antiquated generation tend to want to look at things from our mountaintop, from our village, and that island is gone.

“Our children are in a different world, on a different train, going down a different path, going a thousand miles, and that’s the best way to look at it, I think.”