

ROMEL JOSEPH - Additional Biographical Information

In his own words...

I was born in Gros-Mornes-Gonaives, Haiti on May 19, 1959. I don't remember much about my first 10 years of life, except I did love all kinds of music. I spent much of my time listening to 4 VEH, a Christian radio station. Every morning from 5:00 am to 8:00 am, and afternoons from 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm, I learned some of the most popular Christian songs of that period, as well as most of what I know in the Christian Bible. My musical interests were not limited to Christian music. In addition, I was really interested in Haitian traditional music and *konpa*, which is the most accepted dancing music in Haitian culture.



In 1964, I became legally blind, and my mother enrolled me at Saint Vincent's School for Handicapped Children in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. St. Vincent's was the only school in Haiti for handicapped children and it was approximately 5-6 hours from my home depending on road conditions. The first 5 years I spent there were very difficult for me socially. I was not happy being separated from my family and friends. I could no longer go to do laundry in *Grand-Rivière* (a large river), nor did I have access to my favorite Christian radio stations. *Grand-Rivière* was quite special for me; I would go there with my sister. I learned old traditional Haitian songs from the women who sang while they washed their clothing.

When I was 10 years old, one of my few friends of that time, Onickel Augustin, introduced me to the drums and the handbell choir. Moreover, I had the opportunity to study violin and piano. It didn't take me long to realize that I really loved the violin more than all the other instruments, and I practiced every day so that I could play all the Christian and Haitian popular songs that I liked.

In October 1972, I became a member of the Holy Trinity Philharmonic Orchestra, then, and still, the only classical orchestra in Haiti for youth. For the first time in my life, I received a Christmas present: the orchestra gave me an LP, a record on the life and music of Tchaikovsky. This album changed my life forever. I had a new goal, which was to play the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto some day.

In 1973, the Holy Trinity Philharmonic Orchestra made its first concert tour to the United States, where we performed 25 concerts in 26 days. It was during that tour that the director/founder of the orchestra, Sister Anne-Marie, met Mr. William Moyer, who was then Personnel Manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. From that point on, the two institutions began a partnership which lasted until 1998.

In 1974, the Saint Vincent's Handbell Choir toured the United States and Canada. That was really fun. We didn't stay in hotels, churches or convents. Instead, we were assigned to stay with American and Canadian families where we could make new friends and learn much about their cultures. It was a learning experience for everyone. Those families thought we were so strange for drinking our milk with lots of sugar.

In the summer of 1976, The Boston Symphony Orchestra invited the Holy Trinity Philharmonic Orchestra to Tanglewood, their summer home. We were able to receive individual private lessons, master classes, chamber music coaching, and complete access to all rehearsals and concerts, as well as to all members of the orchestra. That was totally awesome. We had endless questions, and they had the answers.

About Romel Joseph, in his own words...

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In January 1978, I became a student of Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and graduated with honors in music and violin performance in June 1982. At first, it was truly difficult. I had my first encounter with snow and temperatures below zero. In fact, during that winter, Cincinnati had over 20 feet of snow, and I kept getting lost in the snow storms! I also didn't know anyone there and spoke little English. In time, the experience became more and more pleasant. I met lots of friends and the people there were just wonderful. It was also my first encounter with racism, for I didn't experience it in Haiti. It's nice to grow up without having to deal with racism.

From September 1982 to June 1983, I spent a year studying piano tuning at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. In addition, I studied violin with Joel Smirnoff, who was a member of the Boston Symphony. The experience was wonderful. However, from time to time, I was stopped at night by the police who didn't want African American people to walk in rich white neighborhoods. They would ask me, "What are you doing walking in this area?" I would answer, "Did you have a *coup d'état* and you have imposed a curfew?" They would say something nasty, and leave.

From 1983 through 1985, I worked in Haiti teaching music at Saint Vincent's and Holy Trinity Schools, as well as performing frequently in concerts. In 1985, I received a Fulbright Grant and was accepted at The Julliard School, where I studied and received my Master of Music Degree in Violin Performance in June 1987.

I spent the next 8 years working for different music schools in Haiti, and in 1991, I started the *Fondation Haitienne pour le Developpement de la Musique Classique* and the Victorian School, which were designed to offer all children the educational opportunity and the chance to study a musical instrument. In 1995, I relocated to Miami, where I founded Haitian Foundation for Musical Development (HCMD) in 1996, which later became the non-profit Walenstein Musical Organization, in order to provide music education and performance opportunities for young people in South Florida. Some of the programs of the Walenstein Musical Organization include: the Walenstein Youth Symphony Orchestra, the Walenstein International Annual Music Competition, and the Walenstein Professional Symphony Orchestra. After the Victorian School was completely destroyed by an electrical fire in January 2000, I rebuilt it as The New Victorian School.

(learn more at: www.thenewvictorianschool.org and www.walensteinmusic.org)

Update on Romel as of April 10, 2010

Romel Joseph, Executive Director of both The New Victorian School and Walenstein Musical Organization, was released from Jackson Memorial Hospital Rehabilitation Center in Miami, Florida, on March 13th, 2010, after being airlifted to Ryder Trauma Center on January 15th, 2010, due to severe injuries he sustained while trapped under the rubble of the school for 18 hours. Although still undergoing physical therapy and requiring additional surgeries, he returned to Haiti in April for several weeks, with the following goals in mind:

- Start to clear the rubble that was The New Victorian School
- Set up temporary shelter so whatever students can be found can finish out their school year
- Start the rebuilding process
- His dream is to build a real performance hall for all types of concerts and events

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