

JAZZ REVIEW

For Marsalis, the Poison of Slavery Bends to Love

By PETER WATROUS

NEW HAVEN, Jan. 28 — Love, along with its close relatives religion and responsibility, permeates Wynton Marsalis's three-hour meditation on slavery, "Blood on the Fields." Mr. Marsalis, never shy about explaining the world, has produced an extraordinary, expansive work in which the poison of slavery is extracted by love. "Blood on the Fields," which opened a 24-concert American and European tour at

Woolsey Hall here tonight, is a piece finally about the power of care to redeem even the most malevolent and persistent crimes.

Played by the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, 17 members in all, Mr. Marsalis's composition (which had its first and only previous performance in New York in 1994) is a narrative that begins with the violent abduction of Africans and their trip to the New World. Mr. Marsalis uses astringent dissonances and quickly changing rhythms. Nothing stays in one position musically, and there is no satisfaction; the world is unset-

tled and unfamiliar. The trumpet section, with its acidic, tightly clustered harmonies, shouts discontinuity. Over the length of the piece the dissonances are slowly ameliorated, and the duration of the grooves become longer. Satisfaction is found.

Mr. Marsalis, who composed and arranged the piece, wrote the libretto as well, and it was sung by Cassandra Wilson, Miles Griffith and Jon Hendricks. The pieces are songlike, and they advance the narrative. Mr. Griffith plays Jesse, who is in love with Ms. Wilson's Leona. But the destructive weight of slavery turns him callous. He abandons everyone in his life, including Leona, and runs away. He's caught and returned, and when he runs away again, he takes Leona with him. The personal manipulation of slavery falls away when Jesse repudiates its reach, becomes responsible to his culture and acts from love, not selfishness; Mr. Marsalis's parable is clearly intended to extend into the present.

The narrative has a simple structure, but Mr. Marsalis's writing can be profoundly moving, with its intimation of Shakespeare. Ms. Wilson sings, in typical luxuriance, "I hold out my hand/to comfort your wounds,/and give without want/the sweetness of life"; few singers can bring together loss and redemption as she does. Mr. Griffith responds with "I have no heart, it's been crushed and torn by misery./What sweet softness can a man know in his heart/ when others buy and sell his loved ones?"

For an instrumental background, Mr. Marsalis, who conducts the piece and solos on trumpet a bit, has compiled all the techniques that have informed black American music. The trumpets and trombones distort their notes, giving them color. The musicians use plungers and mutes and derbies to expand their instruments' basic sound. The music is vocalized, and notes are bent and sung; pitch is a playground of meaning. And Mr. Marsalis, in the joy of his work songs and ring shouts, makes it clear that the music had a transcendent function.

The written parts are full of jumping polyphony and riffs and call-and-response passages. The rhythm section moves from urgent, flat-out swing, often using odd meters, to Mr. Marsalis's interpretation of Afro-Caribbean rhythms, with ostinatos setting up a context for both the individual solos and howling group improvisations. Mr. Marsalis draws at times on the later work of Duke Ellington; Charles Mingus's image also appears, but for the most part the composition sounds as if it arrived full-blown from his imagination. Free improvisation even shows up a bit.

At the piece's end the band chanted "Oh Lord!"; the trombonist Wycliffe Gordon called out the words and waited for the response. Feet stomped, and love and religion and music all mingled, this time in the present. They were all means of survival, and while Mr. Marsalis has set his work in the past, he has a plan for the future.