

MUSIC REVIEW

Hot-Cha, Tchaikovsky: 'Nutcracker' Swings

By BEN RATLIFF

In Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's reworking of Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite" from 1960, the jazz composers didn't lean on Tchaikovsky for anything beyond the strength of a melody. Not that it was easy. Strayhorn called the process agonizing; they didn't want to cast japes at European music or stain their own body of work. But the piece sounds anything but agonized.

The New York Philharmonic, conducted by Leonard Slatkin, and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, directed by Wynton Marsalis, presented both versions in a five-day run at Avery Fisher Hall that began on Thursday.

In the Ellington-Strayhorn "Nutcracker" the arrangements and flavor are all theirs; they brought in their own signature voicings. To tackle "Dance of the Reed Flutes," considerations had to be made because there were no flutes in the Ellington band. So "Toot Toot Tootie Toot" was rescored for two clarinets, written into a thicket of poking, overlapping brass lines. After the initial theme Ellington and Strayhorn move to blues tonality.

Perhaps the best of Ellington and Strayhorn's reworkings was in the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy," and it was instructive to hear them side by side with the Tchaikovsky. Rather than adapting the celeste theme to Ellington's piano, the jazz composers wrote it for baritone and tenor saxophone, the opposites of the



Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times

Wynton Marsalis, left, with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic in the "Nutcracker" at Avery Fisher Hall.

celeste's Tinkerbelle chime.

As with the "Dance of the Flowers" they let the stiffness out of the "March"; it had a loose, uptempo swing. Mr. Marsalis and the clarinetist Victor Goines soloed here. Short solo sections dot the movements, but Ellington respected Tchaikovsky's feeling for the succinct. Throughout, the jazz orchestra's versions were extremely well played, as smooth in their own way as the Philharmonic's superior treatment.

The first half of the concert was given to four sections from "All Rise," Mr. Marsalis's composition

for combined jazz and classical orchestras, which was given its premier in 1999 by these two ensembles. It's a piece that's knowledgeable about music from Copland to Ellington to mambo to the "Charlie Parker With Strings" albums of the 1950's.

Its thrills aren't in the slight melodies, but in the larger picture: the delicate mechanics of its transitions, the idea to knit together a piece and imbue it with a balanced quality. The segues between orchestra and jazz band were tight and occasionally breathtaking; a comfort has settled in since this piece's beginnings.