

CLASSICAL VIEW/Alex Ross

Talking Some Good, Hard Truths About Music

JAZZ IS AMERICA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC," people often say. President Clinton, among others, has uttered the phrase. There are pernicious implications buried in it. The first is that classical music does not exist at all in the United States, in any indigenous sense; it can only be used as a metaphor for other kinds of music. The second is that jazz itself has become "classical" in the pejorative sense: complete, finished, historical.

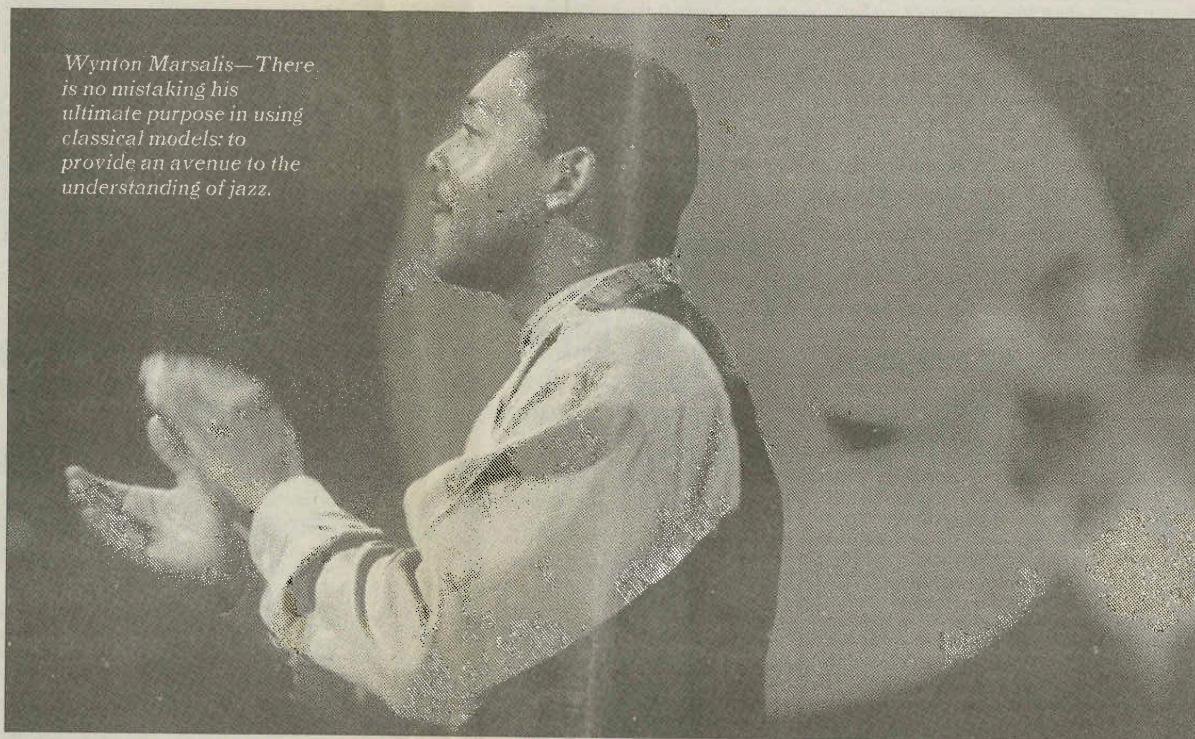
There might be at least a half-truth here. Through the 20th century, jazz has won the universal status that was previously the claim solely of classical tradition. Its procession of major voices, from Louis Armstrong to Duke Ellington to John Coltrane to Miles Davis, is no less imposing than the polemically disordered retinue of American classical composers, perhaps more so. More important for its future, jazz has made precise technical demands on its practitioners that can be codified, after

Wynton Marsalis, donning another hat as music educator on television and video, preaches a strong lesson in a slovenly age.

long argument, into a syllabus for education.

Jazz and classical music are also alike in having reached a difficult historical juncture, that of the limits of radicalism. Jazz's development toward that point was rapid, possibly too rapid. Within Duke Ellington's lifetime, an avant-garde surfaced; it was as if Pierre Boulez had overlapped with Bach. Much as classical tonality returned to fashion in the 1970's and 80's, jazz has lately seen a conservative reaction and a retreat to essentials. In both realms, composers are bedeviled by questions like "What next?" or "Are we finished?"

One can never get too far in such a discussion without mentioning Wynton Marsalis, whose brilliant work as a classical trumpeter has been overshadowed by his controversial leadership role in the jazz world. Lately he has also become an activist in music education as the host of "Marsalis on Music," a television series that PBS has been broadcasting in recent weeks and Sony has released on video. It makes interesting watching, not only for its educational methods but also for its un-



Wynton Marsalis—There is no mistaking his ultimate purpose in using classical models: to provide an avenue to the understanding of jazz.

Frank Stewart/W. W. Norton

derlying philosophy.

Inevitably, the series is modeled on Leonard Bernstein's famous "Young People's Concerts," which captivated several generations of television viewers in the 1950's and 60's. As a television personality, Mr. Marsalis is comparable in many ways to Bernstein; he takes a broad-minded, casual approach to his material yet retains a mildly superior air, which, however irritating it may become on occasion, supplies the necessary professional authority.

Mr. Marsalis devotes half of one program to that mainstay of music appreciation, sonata form. Taking a lead from Bernstein, he picks apart the first movement of Prokofiev's "Classical" Symphony. In a questionable attempt at simplification, he speaks of statement, fantasia and restatement rather than exposition, development and recapitulation. But the generalities lead natu-

rally into a discussion of A-A-B blues form. Another program compares Sousa marches with New Orleans jazz.

FOR THE MOST PART, THE SERIES AVOIDS the kind of groveling baby talk that mars most music-education efforts. Mr. Marsalis tries to make music seem less difficult, but he does not deny the difficulty altogether. He devotes a whole session to practice, with the help of the amiably overworked Yo-Yo Ma; his message is that music requires discipline, hard work, a sound grasp of technique and structure. This is a strong lesson in a slovenly age.

There is no mistaking that Mr. Marsalis's ultimate purpose is to provide an avenue to the understanding of jazz. Classical music is the training ground of technique, the art of virtuosity. The age-old structures are the skeleton into which jazz's improvising spirit is breathed.

Some condescension emerges in his account, although Mr. Marsalis may only be countering condescension toward jazz from the other side. For Bernstein, after all, jazz was either an ingratiating source of entertainment or raw material that classical music could adapt to higher ends.

A Neo-Classicalist through and through, Mr. Marsalis prefers conversation to confrontation, at least in musical terms. He does not make much of the idiosyncrasy and insolence that attach to Prokofiev's treatment of Classical procedures. He minimizes discord in music. "Almost sounds like a blues," he says politely of the raucous dissonances in Ives's Variations on "America." The music he seems to value most exudes a sort of wholesome liveliness.

Needless to say, many in the jazz world contest Mr. Marsalis's views. There is no need to rehash the familiar debates over his programming of Jazz at Lincoln Center. What interests this classically trained observer is that at the opposite pole, in the world of free jazz, much attention is also paid to classical models. In the Matthew Shipp Quartet's new re-

coding, "Critical Mass," to take a random but distinguished example, there is serene, spontaneous movement and a lucid interplay of voices. At the same time, Mr. Shipp's intense and repetitive working-out of largely atonal motifs draws on classical modernism, Bartok in particular.

There have been many questionable claims for a fusion of classical and jazz, as if music were some kind of multidepartmental research project whose results can be pooled for a final report. Mr. Marsalis and Mr. Shipp, from very different angles, are learning from classical music rather than fusing with it. At the same time, they are still speaking the same versatile language. Things do not look as bright in the classical world: composers breathe the air of different planets. But perhaps the grass is always greener when there is mostly cement. □