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Wynton Marsalis: A rhapsody of respect for greats of classical jazz



Wynton Marsalis (left) with his orchestra...

MUSIC

Wynton Marsalis and his Band
Sydney Opera House Concert Hall
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It is about 30 years since a precocious American trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, having won Grammys in both jazz and classical music, divided the jazz world with his controversial opinions.

In a nutshell Marsalis dismissed many of the “innovative” or “experimental” styles which had come into jazz in the 70s and 80s, and emphasised what he saw as the essential elements of jazz: coherent improvisation, swing feel, and the blues.

Many therefore saw him as a conservative, little concerned with jazz as a living, evolving art form, and more concerned with recreating the historical styles which had underpinned the art form for most of its history.

The opening Sydney concert of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JLCO) underlined the latter view. The flavour of the evening's program was undeniably retro: the first half primarily a brilliant rendering of classic Duke Ellington pieces; and the second, inspired arrangements of a number of George Gershwin compositions.

Ellington's saxophone section writing is one of the richest sounds in all of jazz, and the JLO recaptured it gloriously throughout the first half, and also in Billy Strayhorn's unusual 1963 arrangement of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

For a musician of Marsalis's eminence and influence the concert was by no means built around his considerable virtuosity. He sits humbly at the back of the orchestra, at one end of the trumpet section, where he introduces the soloists and announces the program with infectious humour.

Marsalis takes no more solos than other members of the JLCO, which is full of splendid soloists but, whenever he plays, one is reminded of a thought that is easy to forget: Gosh, this man can really play the trumpet!



Wynton Marsalis: he sits humbly at the back of the orchestra, at one end of the trumpet section... PHOTO CREDIT CAROL FRIEDMAN

Highlights for me were the contributions of the saxophonist Sherman Irby, who played a long, soulful solo in Ellington's *Big Fat Alice's Blues*. Later his clever arrangement of Gershwin's *But Not For Me* was memorable, when the band got into an effortless, swinging groove which lifted everyone's spirits.

The Errol Garner-influenced pianist Dan Nimmer was a delight whenever he soloed, and Victor Goines got the biggest ovation of the night for his Sidney Bechet-inspired rendition of *Summertime* on the soprano saxophone.

The capacity audience in the Concert Hall was delighted in what was being offered, and at the end delivered a standing ovation. The members of the audience were primarily elderly, middle-class and well-heeled. This was jazz, not for the buffs, but for the baby boomers.



The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra in performance... PHOTO CREDIT FRANK STEWART

Tonight and tomorrow night the JLCO, in the company of the SSO, will perform two works by Leonard Bernstein and Marsalis's *Swing Symphony*. The latter, first performed in 2010 in Europe, has been described by the articulate UK critic Philip Clark as "stylistically overstacked, orchestrally overcooked, and obviously overlong".

Still, Marsalis has been known to revise his major works as the years go on, so Sydney will be hearing the latest version. I think it will be well received.

Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra perform in Sydney tonight and tomorrow night with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, then tour to Albany, Western Australia (Feb 29); Perth, with the WA Symphony Orchestra (March 3 & 4); and Brisbane (Mar 6).