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Wynton Marsalis: trumpeting controversial ideas of classicism; The talented jazz trumpeter-composer champions what many see as a regressive kind of conservatism. His new violin concerto is premiered tonight by Nicola Benedetti at the Barbican; are his forays into classical music further betraying the jazz cause?

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In June 1986, Wynton Marsalis and Miles Davis were booked to play at the inaugural Vancouver international jazz festival, when the 24-year-old trumpeter took it upon himself to gatecrash Davis's gig, trumpet in hand and ready to play. What happened next -- Miles swears at him like a trooper and Wynton makes a sharp exit -- has, for many, become the defining image of Marsalis's career. In a moment of inexplicable madness, Marsalis's apparent lofty arrogance and sense of entitlement are there for all to see.

Articles critiquing Marsalis, the trumpeter and composer, often heralded as the most powerful man in American jazz today, tend to begin by recalling that sin of Marsalis's youth as a guaranteed way of taking aim and drawing blood.

Comparisons between the battle-weary Davis and the oven-ready Marsalis are irresistible. By the mid-80s, the free-form funk that had once defined Davis's music had settled into a synth-driven jazz-pop, his setlists stuffed with tunes by Prince and Cyndi Lauper. But Miles was Miles, and audiences, subliminally aware, perhaps, that his days were numbered (he died aged 65 in 1991), flocked to his concerts, to hear that trumpet sound.

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Then up pops Marsalis, all sharp-tailored and cocky, like an extra from *Bonfire of the Vanities*. As the trumpeter has since confessed, his intervention that night was motivated by anger; Davis's constant digs and snipes in interviews had got under his skin. "I really liked Wynton when I first met him. He's still a nice young man, only confused," Davis famously said. Marsalis wanted to make a stand.

In interview after interview, Marsalis laid it on the line: the fashion for underpinning jazz with rock backbeats robbed the music of its innate sense of swing, just as free jazz, he claimed, removed the music from its roots in the blues, producing sounds more allied to European modern composition. Davis was the musician who had impatiently shepherded jazz away from bebop towards giving birth to the cool; from the jazz-rock of *Bitches Brew* to the volatile abstraction of an album such as 1976's *Pangaea*. He suspected that Marsalis wanted to recast jazz as repertory music, which he perceived as sounding the jazz retreat. Davis believed that the music must regularly renew and work itself out through improvisation, as musicians inched towards fresh melodic, harmonic and rhythmic terrain experientially on the bandstand; but Marsalis's repositioning of jazz as formalised "classical" music implied that its once itchy evolution had stalled.

When Marsalis recorded the *Haydn Trumpet Concerto* in 1983, Davis reckoned he had marked his card. "They got Wynton playing some old dead European music," he snarled in his autobiography. "If he keeps on, they're going to fuck him up."

On 6 November, the London Symphony Orchestra under James Gaffigan presents the world premiere of Marsalis's latest work: a fully scored *Concerto in D* composed for violinist Nicola Benedetti. Three years ago, Simon Rattle led Marsalis's group and the LSO through a performance of his *Swing Symphony*. And an obvious question is left hanging: this musician who has been so vocal about jazz's core values, espousing the importance of blues and swing as the soul of African-American music -- why is he writing pieces based on European forms that, arguably, had their heyday in the 19th century?

Controversies surrounding Marsalis regularly blow hotter than the music. To New York City's downtown musicians, such as bassist William Parker and pianist Matthew Shipp, whose work mops up the legacy of free-jazz masters such as John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, Marsalis is the embodiment of evil corporate America. Shipp has described Marsalis as a "Reaganist neoconservative ... an academic ... a roadblock". He sucks energy out of the scene, they contend. His Jazz at Lincoln Center fiefdom is both cash-rich and cash-hungry, and any musician who can't buy into Marsalis's retro view of jazz is ruthlessly airbrushed out of consideration.

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Meanwhile, trumpeter Lester Bowie, interviewed in 1996, claimed "Wynton's been given so much money, he's trapped in some opinions that he had at age 21, and he has still got to stand by those at 35 because he has been paid to." And saxophonist David Murray believes Marsalis and his musicians "are conning the public into thinking they're the guys who actually created this stuff, when actually they're just playing a tired version of some music that had some real fire to it".

Here's the truth: Marsalis is a mighty fine trumpet player who, if only he kept his mouth shut, might be more universally revered than he is. After all, there is absolutely nothing morally wrong about playing repertory jazz trumpet. British jazz classicists Humphrey Lyttelton and Alex Welsh did so in the 1950s without giving offence; leading US trumpeters from Marsalis's own generation, Nicholas Payton and Roy Hargrove in particular, have negotiated their own relationships to jazz tradition without feeling any need to issue judgmental statements about the sincere attempts of other musicians to square this tricky circle.

But for all his technical brilliance and charisma, Marsalis has too often been felled by the weight of unsustainable ambition. Even Rattle's architectural sensitivity could do precisely nothing to rescue Marsalis's stylistically overstacked, orchestrally overcooked and obviously overlong Swing Symphony -- a structure claiming to embody the entire history of jazz, held together only by hubris. Towards the end of his life, Dave Brubeck played some charming duets with the trumpeter, but Marsalis's recent reimagining of Brubeck's music with his Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra failed to bottle the essence of the pianist-composer's own specific rapport with jazz history. Instead, Brubeck's music suffocated as stock big-band devices robbed it of its lightness of touch and wit.

Marsalis, in both cases, you feel, lacked the humility to step into these other worlds, rather than expecting orchestral jazz and the music of Dave Brubeck to automatically function in his world.

Reports have suggested that his violin concerto is a more carefully honed score than his Swing Symphony. As Marsalis sees it, jazz is America's classical music, and so writing concertos and symphonies represents no contradiction. But it's that very idea -- that jazz can operate under the terms set by classical music -- that continues to be divisive. Why, his opponents ask, is Marsalis attempting to validate jazz in that way?

Because he can. Our culture prefers certainty and homogenisation, where dangerous ideas such as freedom of expression and improvisation are carefully contained and controlled: the rebellion is brought in-house. And so long as that is true, Marsalis will continue to reign supreme. Until some young upstart gatecrashes his gig.

Nicola Benedetti performs the world premiere of Wynton Marsalis's Concerto in D with the London Symphony Orchestra under James Gaffigan at the Barbican, London, on 6 November.

CAPTION(S):

In symphony ... Wynton Marsalis, with Dan Nimmer (piano) and Carlos Henriquez (bass) of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

Blowing his own trumpet ... Wynton Marsalis performing with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

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