

Classic Ambition

Longer than *Don Giovanni*, *Aida*, or the combined playing time of Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige*, Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, and Hannibal Peterson's *African Portraits*, Wynton Marsalis's *Blood on the Fields*, an oratorio that—like the latter three works—takes as its subject the African American slave experience, is, in short, long. The first question posed by a three-hour piece must be: Does it justify its length? Beethoven, attacked for self-indulgence in his Third Symphony, doubled the duration in his Ninth; time may tilt the scales for Marsalis as well. But the audience for the February 24 Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra performance was unwilling to wait; some two-thirds of the sold-out house rose to its feet ("feet in the butt," the work proclaims, "beget recognition") and fled, greater clumps scurrying with each ensuing episode. Marsalis anticipated that response in an unusual opening plea for the house to stick. "It gets there," he pledged. I was reminded of the screening of Otto Preminger's *Ecstasy* during which, after a few hours, Mort Sahl rose and petitioned the director, "Otto, let my people go!"

As a concert work, *Blood on the Fields* is an exer-

ternal editor. Nor does he have colleagues or friends to tell him that bigger isn't better, that it is no shame to hire a librettist, that he can't walk on water. What he does have is an inexplicable 1997 Pulitzer Prize for a 1994 work (a violation of Pulitzer rules) to validate the hype. He also has an album, recorded in January 1995 (which is why there's no reason to believe the work has changed substantially in the interim), that was inexplicably withheld from release until the Pulitzer.

The three-disc set relieves the listener of the obligation to take it in all at once, yet absorption over time fails to alleviate the dullness and repetitions, and the recording is additionally marred by undistinguished musicianship. All of which is especially perplexing considering the theme. A work that explores the middle passage, slavery, and freedom ought to have emotional resonance—it ought to illuminate the horror (as, for example, Peterson's much superior oratorio does during the boy soprano's invocation in "The Middle Passage") and allow us to share in the jubilation (as, for example, Ellington's incomparable *Black, Brown and Beige* does in the "Emancipation Celebration"). Otherwise, what's the point? White audiences are generally scared to

death to say anything untoward about a work of art that concerns slavery. So the wisecracks that started to build in Avery Fisher Hall last February suggest the irreverence *Blood on the Fields* generates. The record is even more alienating.

It begins with a trumpet cadenza played in a kind of Harry James-meets-Mannie Klein Hollywood jazz style (cf. *Young Man With a Horn*), along with the first of many egregiously chanted lines intended as narrative cues, but droned with such affectlessness as to scream out for parody. Yet the succeeding orchestration illustrates one of Marsalis's undeniable strengths, his gift for mimicry. As a trumpeter, he has played Miles Davis, Louis Armstrong, Cootie Williams, and others with mixed success; as a composer, he has now assimilated without quite internalizing Ellington, Mingus, Horace Silver, Motown, New Orleans, Gillespie, Coltrane, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and more. Stravinsky observed, "A good composer does not imitate; he steals;" but at his best Marsalis imitates with brio and affection. If the use of seesawing arco bass to depict the rolling of ocean waves is a tad obvious, his use of dark muted brasses and Mingusian caphony are distinctive, and he's come up with the striking technique of shoring up declarative vocals with bold instrumental figures. He juices the Horace Silver-

style vamp on "Lady's Lament" with a tricky time signature, alternating four and five; builds the brasses and woodwinds voicings on "Oh We Have a Friend in Jesus" up from the tuba; and subverts AABA form in the pleasing "Juba" (sung by Jon Hendricks), a rhythm song that suggests a Professor Longhair lick wedded to a hambone rhythm, by turning the bridge into a concluding chorus.

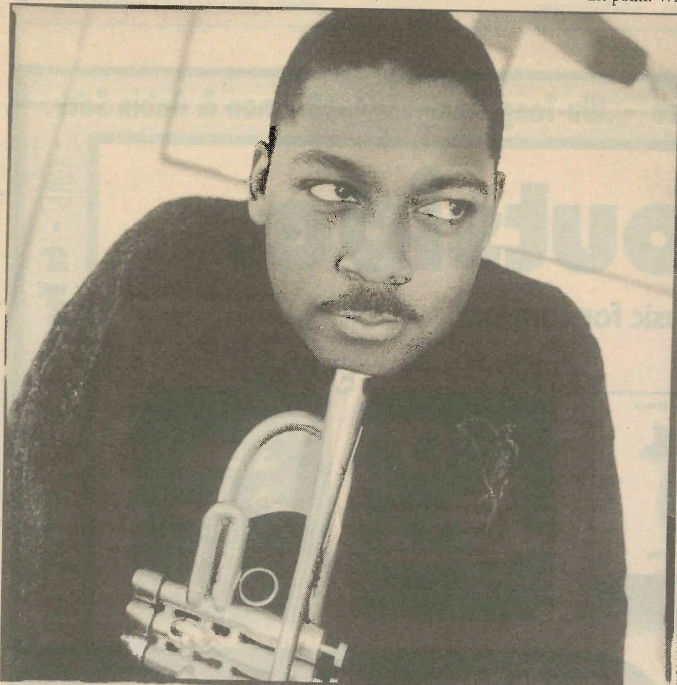
But the parts don't add up. The story concerns

two slaves, an arrogant prince named Jesse and his humanizing woman, Leona, who represent the long road from anger and victimhood to acceptance and triumph. As characters, they are flat and frequently diffuse—the more they sing, the less convincing they are, as flesh and blood or as carriers of ideas. Leona, especially, needs a passionate aria, but despite Cassandra Wilson's considerable ability in combining masks and head tones to maximize expressiveness, she simply does not have the material necessary to make the requisite impression. Marsalis's most powerful melodic idea, the "I will not slave for any man" quatrain (in "Plantation Coffle March") intoned by Miles Griffith as Jesse, is oddly dropped without development.

Marsalis has thought a good deal about his subject, and admirably skirts clichés while engaging false history. Jesse, for example, boasts of all the slaves he owned as an African prince. The white Slave Buyer is no Simon Legree caricature, but a robust citizen on a shopping spree. Yet the conceit turns on itself. Not only does the Buyer—arriving in a marketplace illuminated by a Gillespie Afro-Cuban jazz lick—speak 20th-century black lingo ("people, that's what I'm copping"), but, as sung by Hendricks, he swings harder and with greater joy than any black character in the work. Hearing him scat while the band rocks, you wonder—fasciously—if white slave traders invented jazz and observant slaves just picked it up. And if facetiousness has no place in a work like this, neither do what appear to be inside songwriter jokes—like the passing resemblance between the cadence for the phrase "Soul for Sale" and Porter's "Love for Sale," and between the phrase "Will the sun come out?" and Arlen's "When the Sun Comes Out."

The libretto is at times stuffy ("the bitter lash of failure"), prosaic ("let me bathe in the cool waters of your love"), inapt ("God don't like ugly" in a 19th-century gospel song), and downright silly ("Hawk at the mule/Of tragedy"), and the mosaic of musical borrowings, especially from Ellington and Mingus, is no more coherent. Less inspired than precocious and showy, Marsalis writes like a brilliant student who has mastered all the tricks at the cost of his own individuality. In the last third, which is no more creditable on record than at the end of a concert, he offers an ersatz Ellington song ("I have no heart, it's been crushed and torn by misery"), interpolates a violin reel, repeats his "Juba" theme, and closes with an instrumental, "Duc North," that changes keys in the manner of Ellington's "Going Up."

Stanley Crouch observes in the liner notes that at 32, Marsalis's age when he debuted *Blood on the Fields*, neither Ellington "nor anyone else had written a work this ambitious." That's quite true. But unlike Marsalis, Ellington, at 32, had written numerous classics, from "Black Beauty" to "Rockin' in Rhythm" to "Mood Indigo." He bided his time before attempting a large-form work on black history, abandoning an opera in the interim because it wasn't good enough. The final work, *Black, Brown and Beige*, though long misperceived, produced a number of enduring themes, including "Come Sunday," the most hauntingly original hymn in contemporary music. A roll call of past Pulitzer winners (which does not include Ellington, Mingus, Lewis, Coleman, or any other jazz composer), especially in music, fiction, and theater, will convince anyone that *Blood in the Fields* deserves to reside in that company. But if Marsalis allows the pomp and circumstance to drown out the tramping feet of his audience, he may be doomed to produce one white elephant after another. It's one thing for an avant-gardist to chase crowds away. A champion of the classics ought to be classic himself.



Wynton Marsalis needs an editor, a librettist, or both.

cise in unqualified hubris, a discursive pastiche in which a broad range of influences is welded but not integrated, ingested but not digested. In substituting ambition for discipline, it underscores its composer's most glaring weaknesses—inability to configure a melody, clumsy didactic rhetoric, emotional coldness that arms itself against sentimentality with self-conscious cleverness. Marsalis, as *In This House, on This Morning* made arduously clear, lacks an in-

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