

# Marsalis' Mass performance links gospel, jazz

NEW YORK (AP) — Wynton Marsalis will be turning the House That Jazz Built at the Time Warner Center into the House of the Lord when he premieres his first jazz Mass, which blends the gospel and jazz traditions in a celebration of the 200th anniversary of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York State's oldest African-American congregation.

The 100-plus Abyssinian Baptist Church Bicentennial Choir will lift their voices in song as they make their way through the Rose Theater in the traditional Processional to join forces with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra to perform Marsalis' "Abyssinian 200: A Celebration," a 19-part piece based on the liturgy found in many African-American Baptist churches.

"When we get in there, it's just a big musical auditorium, but when we do the Invocation, it becomes a sanctified place because God's presence enters into it," said Abyssinian's pastor, the Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, who will deliver a sermon on "the uniting power of prayer."



Wynton Marsalis to perform at the Time Warner Center.

"I see this jazz Mass as an opportunity of not only bringing together the jazz and gospel traditions, but as a way of talking about the unique and important contributions of the African-American religious experience to life in America and around the world," he said.

The Mass, with "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine" ac-

tor Avery Brooks serving as the stage director, will be presented through Saturday nights at JALC's main hall, with the last performance recorded for later broadcast on XM satellite radio. The following Saturday there will be two performances at the Harlem church.

Marsalis says that though the piece was commissioned

by JALC to celebrate the Harlem church's bicentennial, the music has a deeper, personal spiritual meaning for him. The trumpeter says he wrote the piece for his grandmother and great-aunt, both born around the turn of the 20th century.

"Both of them were domestic workers and very religious and quiet spiritual people," said Marsalis. "I love those people because of the feeling they had and the religion gave them a large part of that feeling. It was a feeling of warmth and of a soulfulness and an engagement with the world ... not by

escaping things but through confronting them with the power of love."

Before composing the music, Marsalis spent hours talking with Butts about the significance of each part of the prayer service. He further drew upon his diverse influences: his music professor father's lessons about traditional spirituals, hymns and gospel music; his own experience as a classical trumpeter playing the religious works of Bach, Handel and Palestrina; and his encyclopedic knowledge of all styles of jazz dating back to its roots in his native New Orleans.

Marsalis also highlighted the common links between jazz and the African-American religious rite by including call-and-response patterns and leaving room for improvisation.

Both Marsalis and Butts acknowledge that such a collaboration would have been unlikely a century ago when many Black preachers denounced jazz as the "devil's music."

"A lot of that feeling came out of ignorance born of the fact that people of African descent had been stripped of a lot of our culture and fol-

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## Art

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help place "Revolutionary" in its cultural frame. The piece has doubled in value over the past year, but, at \$2,000, it's still modestly priced.

The changing attitudes are not the only explanation for the changing market. Bill Hodges, owner of Manhattan's Bill Hodges Gallery, attributes it to "African-Americans being able to afford an investment in art."

Hodges has collected African-American art for more than 30 years. For most of that time, 90 percent of his customers were of non-African descent. Today, he says, the numbers have reversed — over 95 percent of his customers are fellow African-Americans.

And new interest is not confined to African-American art alone. The Ghanaian artist Tafa, now a resident of Harlem, New York, has seen attitudes evolve first-hand.

"More and more people are appreciating Black art, definitely," he said. "It used to be under-represented, but now it gets attention both here [the U.S.] and there [Europe]."

In late January, the London-based Bonhams became the first non-South African auction house to have a sale dedicated exclusively to South African art. The sale brought in 1,422,528 pounds, with Irma Stern's works "The Tomato Picker" and "Portrait of a West African Girl" fetching the top prices — 186,000 and 138,000 pounds, respectively.

Both sale prices were more than 50,000 pounds above their pre-auction estimated prices. In 2006, Bonhams sold a self-portrait by South African artist Gerard Sekoto for more than nine times its estimate. That portrait of Sekoto, a pioneer of urban Black art and social realism, fetched 123,000 pounds.

In the U.S., the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art opened a new exhibit devoted exclusively to African art.

The exhibit, titled "Tradition as Innovation", opened in January of this year. Whereas the typical exhibit emphasizes the influence African art had over modern artists who broke with tradition, such as Picasso, "Tradition as Innovation" pre-

sents African art in its own context.

At the Black Fine Arts Show in New York, Mark Small, owner of the Colorado-based Golden Galleries, was quick to point out the involvement of the youth in the scene. "All the time I see members of the younger generation recognizing African-American artists that, throughout most of their career, have remained largely unknown. That's really great to see," he said.

Many of those older artists trained in the city of Chicago. There, two pioneering schools gave African-American artists an opportunity to study when few others would: the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the South Side Community Art Centre.

The city subsequently became a hub, and many significant artists, including Wadsworth Jarrell, spent at least one year studying there. The works they produced marked a turning point in the history of Black art.

Today, the growing interest in Black art may mark another.

Lance Steagall writes for GIN.



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