

Unusual night of jazz hits right creative nerve

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Squeaks, squawks and splats are what the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra had to offer at the Wilson Commencement Park benefit concert Monday night. Saxophonist Ted Nash, in describing a movement of the work he wrote for the occasion, could only mumble into the microphone. “That’s how it goes,” he said, not all jokingly, to the audience’s surprise.

But this unusual night of jazz hit just the right creative nerve with the audience. The crowd listened with attentive ears to an entire evening of new works, headlined by Nash’s *Portrait in Seven Shades*, and supplied big applause, cheers and standing ovations for jazz that was anything but easy to digest.

There isn’t a better band to

preach contemporary jazz, but JLCO has rarely been one to take on such a challenge. Trumpeter and bandleader Wynton Marsalis’ focus has always been on the historical roots of jazz, not its future. Not only was Nash’s work cutting-edge in many respects, but so were the two works that opened the concert.

The first, by JLCO saxophonist Sherman Irby, sounded as if three New Orleans marching bands, each playing to their own tune, were headed right at the audience. A second work, written for the band by modern jazz guitarist Bill Frisell was topsyturvy with punchy melodies of clashing notes.

But Nash’s *Portrait in Seven Shades*, an extended orchestral-like work, was the most jarring and original. Each movement is based on one of



JEN RYNDA staff photographer

Wynton Marsalis of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra performs at the Auditorium Theatre on Monday.

seven important, historic painters: Claude Monet, Salvador Dali, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso to Marc Chagall to Jackson Pollock.

Movements based on Dali, Picasso and Pollock, known for their modernism, went deeper into musical exploration. Drooping pitch, distorted

time and avant-garde note clusters were used to paint each artist with sound.

In a movement inspired by Picasso, even Marsalis, the king of traditional jazz, took a Spanish-tinged and experimental solo that had drummer Ali Jackson out on a limb with him in free-jazz style.

Every band member had a moment to stand out. Marsalis builds his solos in a thoughtfully constructed way. Trumpeter Marcus Printup can play loud and high. Saxophonist Irby is refined and smooth no matter what style he plays. Carlos Henriquez combines the percussive and melodic on his bass. Dan Nimmer on the piano has a playful style.

And it was those musicians who made a concert of brash, unfamiliar jazz such a success. □

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