

Wynton Marsalis goes to church, gloriously

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When a jazz musician plays music with power and emotion, it's referred to as "going to church."

Wynton Marsalis has taken the expression literally. His newly released two-CD recording, "In This House, On This Morning,"



Marsalis

is a musical rendering of a Sunday morning gospel church service. This is not sacred music to be used during a service; the music reflects the human doings that make up the service.

Marsalis' compositional skill is the most ambitious displayed in jazz today. In a historical sense, it eclipses all others except that of Duke Ellington — the difference being that Ellington created much of the jazz vocabulary while Marsalis uses the vocabulary to create epic works.

It was in his ambition to create longer orchestral works that Ellington stumbled. The major criticism of them is that they felt like individual pieces of music strung together rather than a compact whole. Marsalis avoids that conundrum.

What holds "In This House" together is the narrative of the churchgoer's day — something you can relate to even if you're not a jazz fan. There is a definite beginning, middle and end to this nearly two hours of music.

Much of jazz has centered on a narrative — from the tragic love tale of "Frankie and Johnny" to Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man." Marsalis has worked with the long form narrative, starting with 1989's "Soul Gestures in Southern Blue."

"In This House," commissioned by the Lincoln Center and three years in

the making, is a glorious culmination of that work. The music is generally melodic and accessible although opening "Devotional" is somewhat resonant. No melody or part lasts very long although the piece is held together to some extent by recurring themes. Solos are generally short, kept to a few bars in most cases.

There are two vocal tracks. One of them, "In This House," is sung by Marion Williams. The other, "In the Sweet Embrace of Life Sermon," is a mix of bass slaps and guttural voicings by bassist Reginald Veal.

The rest of the two discs are instrumental. Marsalis uses his instrumentation well, from the gentle swing of "Call To Prayer" and the serenity of "Hymn" to the upbeat thrill of "Processional," driven by a sanctified tambourine, and "Pot Blessed Dinner." It encompasses much of the history of jazz with New Orleans traditional, gospel voicings, blues shouts, swing, bebop and more. The call and response pattern comes through often with a single horn melody playing against ensemble horn voices.

There are no parts of the piece that stick out as profoundly bad or out of place. One might wish for more soloing or for former Marsalis pianist Marcus Roberts' rootsy sound rather than the lighter touch of Eric Reed on this record. But there is nothing lacking on this recording.

Marsalis is not an innovator who will set jazz off in a new direction. His importance to jazz, and possibly all American music at this point, is as a composer who can capture the essence of whatever he is addressing.

With his mastery of the trumpet in the jazz and classic idioms, Marsalis has answered the challenge of putting it all together — including use of avant garde approaches. With "In This House" he has in no uncertain terms carved out a niche much deeper and more satisfying than most others have attained.