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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Jazz Effort to Make Political Speeches Swing

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Ralph Ellison, who was lured away from the trumpet to become a writer, once explained that in jazz there is a "cruel contradiction implicit in the art form." It is a contradiction between the individual and the group, between solitary assertion and collective cooperation.

A "true jazz moment," Ellison said, "springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest," in which the very nature of the player's identity is at stake. That is the drama of solo riffs, of call-and-response interchanges, of daring high-wire improvisations.

A different kind of cruel contradiction seemed to be on display on Thursday night when Jazz at Lincoln Center continued its opening celebrations with a concert called "Let Freedom Swing." (The program will be repeated tonight at the Rose Theater.) This contradiction didn't come from within the music, but from the purpose it was asked to serve.

Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Morgan Freeman reading the words of Robert F. Kennedy.

Over the course of several weeks, the events at the new $128 million performance complex etched into the high-gloss, high-priced mall of the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle, have been intended to display jazz's broad range, deep ambition and, not incidentally, ready marketability.

But Wynton Marsalis, the jazz institution's artistic director, also wanted to make a major political and social statement, calling the concert "A Celebration of Human Rights and Social Justice" and deliberately scheduling it just before Election Day.

So six new compositions were commissioned for the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, setting texts and speeches by Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Vaclav Havel, Lyndon B. Johnson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The texts were recited by celebrities: Morgan Freeman, Mario Van Peebles, Alfre Woodard, Glenn Close, Patricia Clarkson, Keith David and the Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts III.

And while the composers themselves were less well known; they were, after all, meant to write music in service to the ideas being expressed.

But this kind of devotion to the text or even an attempt to illuminate and expand on the text — was missing through much of the concert. Rather as if a trumpeter, called upon to improvise on a motif and to carry forward a musical argument, ended up having very little fresh to add to the argument, to what was already being said. That was certainly the case in the settings of Mr. Mandela's and Archbishop Tutu's words by Darius

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Brubeck and Zim Ngqawana, or Emil Viklicky's settings of words by Mr. Havel or Toshiko Akiyoshi's settings of Mrs. Roosevelt.

The jazz orchestra was used more for mood and occasional punctuation than for illumination.

Jimmy Heath's settings of Johnson's speeches were a bit more cogent (they were introduced with some oblique electioneering by Mr. Marsalis, who favorably compared Johnson to another president from Texas). But it wasn't until hearing Darin Atwater's settings of Kennedy, that the evening's ambitions even seemed plausible.

First, the Kennedy text — an address delivered to South African students in 1966 — had a very clear structure, while most of the other texts seemed chosen in an eagerness to sound every political chord rather than to serve dramatic or musical purposes. Mr. Atwater's muscular imagination also took the idiom of the jazz orchestra, the manners of the ballad and the gestures of swing, and smartly used them to comment on the words.

When Kennedy condemned moral expediency, the music seemed to flutter with frivolity; his criticism of comfort was accompanied by sounds that sashayed with indulgence. There were moments too in Billy

Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Wynton Marsalis performing with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra during opening ceremonies.

Childs's settings of King's words, when the ominous thrusts of the score or its expectant ecstasy revealed how much more might have been possible.

But the sense of a cruel contradiction remained. It seemed as if more was being asked than could be delivered, as if the texts would have been better off standing on their own, as if their ideas of freedom, rights, liberty could not be fully embodied in sound.

This seems strange because, as Ellison suggested, the idea of struggle and the notion of individuality are inscribed in the very textures of jazz. And the musical style, in all its incarnations, has achieved a liberating reputation over the course of decades simply for sociological reasons: jazz — its performance and its appeal — helped break down racial boundaries through the first half of the 20th century. Even Mr. Marsalis, in his recent book, "To a Young Jazz Musician," has emphasized the ways in which jazz is an "act of rebellion," or the ways in which swing is "democracy made manifest."

So if the drama in jazz involves a confrontation between the collective and the individual, if it reflects certain forms of organization and drama, why shouldn't it be able to illuminate texts that do the same? Mr. Havel, after all, prescribes inner freedom, the independence of reason and openness to the deepest voice of one's own conscience. Kennedy celebrates achievements wrought by individuals in trying conditions. King attacks the spirit of alienation that splits an individual off from society.

But one problem is that the grandeur of so much jazz comes not from its monumentality but from its individualism. And that is not the real message of so many of these speeches. They are invoking large social forces and making imposing social promises. Even in the best of stylistic circumstances, this is not easy to represent in sound.

Narrated text accompanied by music is a genre fraught with risk anyway, and is often maudlin or obvious (that includes Copland's classic "A Lincoln Portrait.") It may also be, though, that musical styles really do have different kinds of functions, their languages better suited to some occasions rather than others.

They create societies in sound, each with its own favored meanings and matters. A swing band or for that matter a Baroque dance suite might not, for example, be the ideal accompaniments to affairs of state.

Did this concert, then, display a cruel contradiction, or was it just an example of ambitions falling short? Did it display jazz's limitations or its unfulfilled possibilities? One of Mr. Marsalis's goals at his new institutional home may be to find out.