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## Marsalis tunes kids in to music

MARSALIS, from Page 1E

Gershwin and Ellington.

And "Marsalis on Music" is a smart, refreshingly non-snooty music appreciation primer that could prove just as useful and absorbing for adult musical novices as for the series' main target audience of young people between the ages of 9 and 15.

"I wanted to bring the joy of music to people and their kids and make it as painless as possible," Marsalis said.

He also took inspiration from the late conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, whose famous CBS series of "Young People's Concerts" set the standard for televised musical education some 30 years ago.

"I believe the reason it took so long to resume this effort has a lot to do with the declining educational values of our society," said Peter Gelb, executive producer of the "Marsalis on Music" project. "But also, it has to do with the fact that following Leonard Bernstein is not easy."

But Marsalis, 33, has that special knack.

He was raised in a musically attuned New Orleans family. His father is a music education teacher. His brother, Branford, is also a nationally known jazz performer and former bandleader on "The Tonight Show."

Though mostly recognized for his stunning concert performances and recordings, Wynton is also "an educator consumed with a missionary-like passion," Gelb said. "Wynton (is) like a Pied Piper on tour, always finding time for instant master classes for young musicians wherever he happened to be."

It's that passion for music that comes across in "Marsalis on Music," which explores the basics of music through a unique dialogue between the host's jazz band and the famed Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, a gifted student ensemble led by maestro Seiji Ozawa.

But Marsalis' down-to-earth manner is also an essential teaching tool in this offbeat "classroom," whether he's dribbling a basketball to illustrate the nature of musical rhythm or comparing the use of drums in jazz to the engine of a train.

In the series premiere, "Why Toes Tap," Marsalis explores rhythm by comparing two renditions of "The Nutcracker": Tchaikovsky's original and Duke Ellington's mesmerizing jazz arrangement. It's a fascinating, relaxed laboratory on how composers evoke varying emotions and create distinctive sounds.

"Our challenge in today's children's television environment of numbing action and overstimulating visuals," Gelb said, "was to entertain without compromising Wynton's highly informative and intellectually challenging concepts."

Therefore, "Marsalis on Music" blends the music of Tchaikovsky, Ellington and others with a moderate portion of innovative visual pizzazz, including eye-catching graphics and computer animation.

"They aren't a bow to MTV," Marsalis explained.

"We use the graphics to make a point. And after we've made that point, we don't keep showing the graphics."

Produced for PBS by Sony Classical Film & Video, "Marsalis on Music" is also being distributed worldwide on a Sony Classical collection of home video cassettes. A companion book and CD is being released this week by W.W. Norton & Co.

It's all part of the project's hoped-for afterlife in classrooms and homes.

When children are very young, Marsalis said, they're always singing and drawing and being encouraged to develop their creative imaginations. But by second or third grade, that artistic nurturing gets lost in the schoolroom shuffle.

"The creative aspect of their education becomes unimportant," Marsalis said. "But you've got to have art. Music matters."

"I think it is just a matter of us becoming more sophisticated in terms of understanding what a complete and well-rounded education is."

In its own imaginative, highly accessible fashion, "Marsalis on Music" is a tuneful step in the right direction. It's art smart.