

Overview of Marsalis – Concerto for Trumpet

What has the process of working on this new concerto with Wynton been like? How did it come about?

In 2019 I had a meeting with Mark Williams (Cleveland Orchestra Director of Artistic Planning at that time) where the idea of a new Trumpet Concerto commissioned by the orchestra for me came up. I always had Wynton Marsalis at the top of my list for this project, but we also discussed a number of other possible composers to approach with this idea. After a couple of meetings, I told Mark that I knew Wynton and would be happy to ask him about this. I emailed Wynton that night asking if he'd be willing to entertain the idea of composing a concerto for me and the orchestra, and fifteen minutes later he wrote back saying that he had just spoken with his A and R person at CBS Records who he hasn't spoken to in 25 years, and that she asked him when he was going to write a trumpet concerto – so he told me right then that he would love to do it!

Wynton and I are exactly the same age (he's 5 weeks older than me) and we have known each other for a very long time. I have the utmost respect and admiration for him and his artistry. It's been incredibly fun and inspiring to get to talk together, first about what we both envisioned this piece could be, and then to see this tremendous piece that he has created.

Early on I asked Wynton and his copyist Jonathan Kelly to create a piano reduction of the orchestral score in order for me to rehearsal with a pianist and get a better sense of how everything fit together in context. The wonderful Cleveland Institute of Music faculty member and extra Keyboard player with the orchestra, Alicja Basinska, has been rehearsing with me over the past three weeks. I've worked with Alicja on many projects over the years and her help doing these piano rehearsals with me have been invaluable in my preparation for all of this.

Additionally, on March 27th I had the opportunity to read through the first four movements of the concerto with the University of Iowa Orchestra led by their Director of Orchestral Studies, Mélisse Brunet (a Cleveland Institute of Music graduate). This was another invaluable tool toward my learning curve of how to navigate the piece, as well as for Wynton and Jonathan to get a sense of the orchestration and make any adjustments.

As we've gotten closer to the completion of the full orchestration and ramping up my preparation as the performances get closer, Wynton and I have been increasingly talking through all aspects of the concerto. At one point recently we had six calls together, each lasting more than an hour, with each call going bar by bar in a detailed manner through each one of the six movements. This gave me a wonderfully in-depth window into Wynton's composition process and meaning, enabling me to understand clearly what he intends with everything that he's written here. After going through my piano rehearsal process and understanding

all of this information from Wynton, I could then offer any feedback on what I'm finding are the best ways in which I can interpret things from my end and any adjustments we can possibly make in order to help things all work together best.

Wynton said that the concerto attempts to capture the rich legacy of trumpet players/playing throughout history. What are some of the particular influences you hear and resonate with in the work?

This concerto truly reflects the wide variety of styles that the trumpet can access. With that in mind, there are many players who have influenced me whose voices I hear in this piece.

The first movement has many moments of call and response fanfare style. This is a traditional historic role of the trumpet as a signal instrument and one that we play often in the orchestral repertoire. With that call and response fanfare style so evident here, I feel the presence and bold sound of many great orchestral players who have influenced me over the years- chief among them are Thomas Stevens (former Principal, Los Angeles Philharmonic), Philip Smith (former Principal New York Philharmonic), and Adolph "Bud" Herseth (former Principal, Chicago Symphony).

In the second movement ballad I hear a lot of the great Louis Armstrong here- his beautiful sound, elegance, and his extraordinary use of timing and space. There are also moments in this movement where I feel the influence of Doc Severinsen and Conrad Gozzo with their soaring and captivating sound that's like listening to a great vocalist.

In the third movement, I feel a strong presence of the sensational Mexican trumpet player Rafael Mendez, whose suave technique and elegant style seem to reflect more of a virtuoso violinist than a trumpet player.

In the fourth movement, Wynton writes a blues where I explore a wide variety of lyrical and intimate sounds using five different mutes (cup, straight, harmon, plunger, and felt hat). Each of these mutes helps me capture a different color, mood, and character. For inspirations in this movement, Wynton led me to recordings of jazz greats James "Bubber" Miley and Charles "Cootie" Williams (known for his time with Duke Ellington's orchestra where he succeeded Bubber Miley). While I knew of Mr. Williams, I had not heard of Mr. Miley until Wynton send me a link to his playing. Being exposed to these great artists was illuminating, and hearing them opened up a door into a stylistic and sonic world that was new to me.

The French influenced fifth movement for me reflects the influence of greats Maurice Andre, Pierre Thibaud (longtime professor of trumpet at the Conservatoire de Paris), and Roger Voisin (former Principal, Boston Symphony).

I was very close with Mr. Voisin whose crystal-clear articulation and sense of line embodied the elegant style of this movement.

The sixth movement has a strong Eastern European feel coming out of the Jewish musical tradition of that region. Wynton mentioned that along with this he was inspired by the piece “Ko Ko” by Charlie Parker with Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. The meshing of the Eastern European/Jewish feel and Bebop is reflected throughout this movement with playful sections and a spirited dancing energy throughout. My first teacher was Ziggy Elman, famed big band trumpet player with the Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey bands among many others, who was known for his wild playing and klezmer influenced style. I feel Ziggy’s voice very strongly throughout this movement as well, which really ties everything together for me and brings everything full circle in a wonderfully personal way.

What are 1-2 moments that stick out to you in the work? (These can be fun/challenging/gratifying moments to play, or anything else!)

Diving into the use of the different mutes used in the fourth movement (straight, cup, harmon, plunger, and felt hat) and the opportunity to learn some new techniques for this was both challenging and fun for me. It’s rare that I get to venture into this style like this, and it gave me the opportunity to pick Wynton’s brain on this subject, as well as to be exposed to and learn about some incredible artists who I either didn’t know or only had a cursory sense of who they were and what they did.

Toward the end of the third movement there is a cadenza section for me where I play a prayer-like melody that is hovering over an “OM” held note drone in the horns. This held note is usually in an interval of a second to me (one whole step away) which creates a dissonance between our voices and a gravitas for this moment that is serenely eerie and intimately beautiful.

What do you hope audiences will take away from hearing this new work?

I hope that people come away seeing the many different voices and styles that the trumpet can do, some that may surprise you. At thirty-five minutes in length, this is longer than most trumpet concertos and more akin to the typical length of a piano, violin, or cello concerto. I hope that as we explore all of these various styles and different voices that the audience will feel that the trumpet is also capable of captivating an audience for this length of time.