

Marsalis' 'Big Train' to have area premiere



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"The music itself is evocative old time rail travel, complete with the ambient sounds of the rail yards, train stations and locomotives." – Scott Belck



(Photo: Provided/Aaron Jesse)

"Big Train" by jazz great Wynton Marsalis is a journey back in time, when big bands toured the country via rail.

On Wednesday, the Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra, which is dedicated to playing the music of living composers and arrangers, will perform the regional premiere of Marsalis' jazz suite in Harriet Tubman Hall at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Downtown. It will be conducted by Marsalis' Jazz at Lincoln Center colleague, trumpeter Todd Stoll.

Marsalis, the only jazz musician who has won the Pulitzer Prize in music, found his inspiration for this piece in jazz greats such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and John Coltrane, who criss-crossed the country by train.

Marsalis and his Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra debuted "Big Train" in 1998 and recorded it a year later. The 12 movements of the 52-minute suite are named for the different train cars, from All Aboard, Observation Car, Union Pacific Big Boy, Smokestack Shuffle and Night Train to, finally, the Caboose.



The saxophone section in the Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra. (Photo: Provided/Phillip Groshong)

Scott Belck, who is director of the Jazz and Commercial Music Program at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, is the artistic director and co-founder of the Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra.

Orchestra members include pianist Phil DeGreg, trumpeter Kim Pensyl, trombonist Marc Fields, saxophonist Brent Gallaher, trumpeters Matt Anklan and John Zappa, bassist Aaron Jacobs and percussionist Art Gore.

Belck spoke about his orchestra and "Big Train."

Question: What can people expect from "Big Train?"

Answer: Wynton's "Big Train" is like a jazz tone poem. The music itself is evocative old time rail travel, complete with the ambient sounds of the rail yards, train stations, and locomotives. All this is blended with shuffles and grooves and solos of the touring big bands of the classic Swing Era. It's an exciting piece that swings hard and moves gracefully from danceable numbers to down-home blues.

Q: When did you establish the Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra and who plays in it?

A: Members of the board and I founded it in 2012. It is a 17-member ensemble dedicated to performing, preserving, and teaching jazz as a living art form. Its members are some of the preeminent jazz artists and educators in the nation.

The members have performed, toured and/or recorded with many of the top names in the jazz and commercial music industry. Those include Ray Charles, the Woody Herman Orchestra, Manhattan Transfer, Wynton Marsalis, Michael Feinstein, Fred Hersch, Conrad Herwig, the Temptations, Arturo Sandoval, Tony Bennett, the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, Bootsie Collins, Clark Terry, the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

As educators, nearly all of the ensemble members serve on the music faculties of prominent university music schools, including Miami University, Northern Kentucky University, Butler University, Xavier University, the University of Dayton and CCM.

Q: You present four to six concerts per year. What is your programming philosophy?

A: We explore the works of contemporary composers as well as those of the masters of the jazz heritage, including Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis and Gil Evans. As a nonprofit corporation, the orchestra is dedicated to reaching out to the Greater Cincinnati community by offering educational programs and performances that aim to enrich and transform lives through the power of the arts.

Q: Is music of the Swing Era making a comeback in your opinion?

A: I believe there is a growing audience of young people who are new to experiencing the thrill, excitement, and beauty of jazz being artfully performed by large ensembles, comprised of accomplished creative artists.

'Big Train'

What: All Aboard: "Big Train," by Wynton Marsalis, Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra, with Todd Stoll, guest conductor

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Harriet Tubman Hall, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Downtown

Tickets: \$12; \$8 students/children, at brownpapertickets.com/event/817887, at cincinnati jazz.org or at the door



NEA Jazz Master and three time Grammy nominee, saxophonist Jimmy Heath performs in 2013 at the UC College-Conservatory of Music with the Cincinnati Contemporary Jazz Orchestra. (Photo: Provided/Constella Festival)

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