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Jazz master Marsalis teaches
NEC students how to swing
— and how to think

In Wynton's class

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It's a matter of getting control over your instrument," Wynton Marsalis tells trumpeter Darren Barrett. "Listen." And, picking up his own horn, Marsalis blows a soft but complex stream of notes that fills the New England Conservatory classroom on Wednesday afternoon.

"If you start here," he continues, playing a high, loud flourish, "where can you go?"

Trombonist Jamal

Haynes, like Barrett one of seven students enrolled in the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance program that NEC launched last month, enters and takes out his horn. "You had great ideas at that jam session last night," Marsalis tells Haynes, "but your sound is too dark. You've got to open your sound, get more depth in it."

This is Wynton Marsalis the teacher, and he seems to be in his element. Ask 34-year-old Marsalis about his current activities and he will insist that "I'm still a trumpet player first," a role he will assume tonight when appearing with the Monk Institute Ensemble at the Jordan Hall Restoration Celebration. When the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra drew a full house at Symphony Hall two weeks back, though, Marsalis functioned primarily as conductor and composer; and his PBS series "Marsalis on Music," which concludes Monday (Channel 2, 8 p.m.), has found

him functioning — like Leonard Bernstein 40 years earlier — as America's music teacher.

"It was the years I spent giving master classes at schools like Dorchester High that prepared me for the TV series," he explains in a break between his NEC classes. "It's rare that I get to work with musicians as intensely as I have this week." The seven Monk Institute/NEC students will no doubt concur that study with the trumpeter is nothing if not intense.

"No," Marsalis says later, stopping a run-through of Monk's "Ba-lue Bolivar Blues-are." "What [saxophonist Ignaz Dinne] was playing was a model of intelligence, with ideas that kept building. But," he adds, turning to the rhythm section, "what were you doing behind him? You're both playing chordal instruments," he explains to pianist Helen Sung and guitarist Ofer Ganor, "and if one is

playing block chords the other has to make a more intelligent decision of what to contribute. And you two," he says to bassist Keala Kaumeheuiwa and drummer Sean Thomas, "have two responsibilities: to play together and to play with him. You've got to get in the pocket immediately."

The band begins again while Marsalis stands behind Thomas, picks up a pair of sticks and plays a couple of choruses on drums. Then he moves to the piano, sits down next to Sung and plays supporting chords. When the other musicians respond by playing louder, Marsalis stops them again. "An intelligent act has an intensity of its own," he insists, "so every intelligent choice that you make doesn't have to be grandiose."

If Marsalis values anything above intelligence, it is swing. "All of the great jazz musi-

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / DAVID L. RYAN

Wynton Marsalis at the New England Conservatory: "It's rare that I get to work with musicians as intensely as I have this week."

At NEC, Marsalis wears his mentor cap

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cians – Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, even Ornette Coleman – had that shuffle in their rhythm,” he begins, returning to the drums. “Swinging is just hitting those quarter notes and how you play that shuffle,” which he proceeds to demonstrate by moving his accents around the basic 4/4 time pattern. Later he will point out, “A groove is two different parts that interact” when he detects that the individual band members are failing to connect.

The demands Marsalis makes throughout the class are less a judgment on the individual players, who earned their seats in the program after intense competition, than his response to what he considers faults common to most musicians. “Yesterday, when I asked the class if anyone remembered anything Helen played after she finished her solo, no one could. And no one ever can, whether I’m in a classroom or on the bandstand at the Village Vanguard. There’s a constant tension in the world between ‘me’ and ‘y’all’ – and, in this era, ‘me’ is winning. That’s why music is long, loud and boring.

“Look at that jam session some of us went to last night,” he continues. “I played three or four choruses; the next musician played eight, and the next one must have played 12. Did everyone really have that much to say? I think jam sessions

are great for working on your ears. You should go to sessions and play tunes that you don’t know – but only one or two choruses.”

With one of the fullest schedules in music, Marsalis has no choice but to make his choruses count. He broke up his septet at the end of 1994 and says with pride that the group’s seven-year run is “an experience none of us will ever duplicate in this era.” Since January, he has recorded his extended orchestral composition “Blood on the Fields” as well as a classical album; toured on four occasions with either a quartet or the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra; written his first string quartet as well as a score for choreographer Twyla Tharp; completed the book that accompanies his TV show (which was filmed in the summer of ’94); and produced the bulk of the 26-episode “Making the Music,” a National Public Radio series built around interviews with fellow musicians that WGBH will begin airing in January.

What has surfaced from all of this activity has been memorable. “Marsalis on Music,” which he wrote after Leonard Bernstein’s daughter provided access to her father’s handwritten scripts for “The Joy of Music,” is a worthy successor that treats classical and jazz with equal care and enthusiasm. The portions of “Blood on the Fields” heard at Symphony Hall promise a complete work

more richly detailed than his previous extended efforts. The rest of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra concert, featuring lesser-known Ellingtonia, indicated that Marsalis has also become an excellent jazz conductor. “I never learned how to lead,” he says. “It’s just something I knew how to do. When I was a kid and played football with my friends, I was always the quarterback. Put me in a basketball game with anybody now and I’ll be the point guard.”

Put him in front of young musicians, as he has been at the Conservatory this week, and he will also take charge. “I was fascinated by my daddy [pianist Ellis Marsalis], Alvin Batiste, Art Blakey, Dizzy Gillespie, Clark Terry,” he recalls, when asked about his own early exposure to jazz artists. “The way they carried themselves, the way they talked, the respect they commanded through their travels and experiences. I had a great childhood. I was good in sports, had girlfriends and lots of buddies, and didn’t have to withdraw into the music. It was the musicians that brought me to jazz.”

At the pace he has maintained for the past 15 years, and with his tough-love approach to jazz pedagogy, Wynton Marsalis has already repaid that debt many times over.