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Playlist

Quiet Jazz, Roaring Noise, Hip-Hop Wizardry

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Marcus Shelby Jazz Orchestra

The bassist Marcus Shelby, who was once a member of the Los Angeles band Blacknote and now leads the Marcus Shelby Jazz Orchestra in San Francisco, has taken the idea of the narrative jazz suite from Duke Ellington (via Wynton Marsalis, whose work his strongly resembles) and built his own large-canvas works, rich in American history and jazz history. His last was "Port Chicago," about a 1944 explosion at a California naval base that killed hundreds of black sailors; his newest is "Harriet Tubman" (Noir), a jazz oratorio that had its initial performances last year.

The intense-voiced singer Faye Carol, in a strong performance, takes Tubman's role in the story, which begins with the arrival in America of Tubman's Ashanti grandmother on a slave ship and goes through Tubman's endurance of slavery and her disciplined leadership of slave escapes, to her time spent with the Union Army and the women's suffrage movement. The two discs are full of recognizable ingredients, doubly so if you have already heard them filtered through Mr. Marsalis's longer works: '50s film music, Coltrane-ish workouts, Ellingtonian horn voicings. It's cautious, but still ambitious.