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## **TIMESline**

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Alvin Singleton is no ordinary composer. For starters, he's African-American in an overwhelmingly white institution. He worked in an accounting firm before he began to pursue music as a career. And today his pieces are as likely to reflect Miles Davis as they are Bach. He is an original in classical music.

# His own invention

By JOHN FLEMING  
Times Performing Arts Critic

**M**ATLANTA  
aking generalizations about composers is a loose game, but if there is something all the successful ones share, it is an almost brash self-confidence. You need to believe in yourself to make it in modern music.

Consider Alvin Singleton's answer to a not-entirely-serious question:

If you could be any composer in history — Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Stravinsky, Gershwin or anybody else — who would you be?

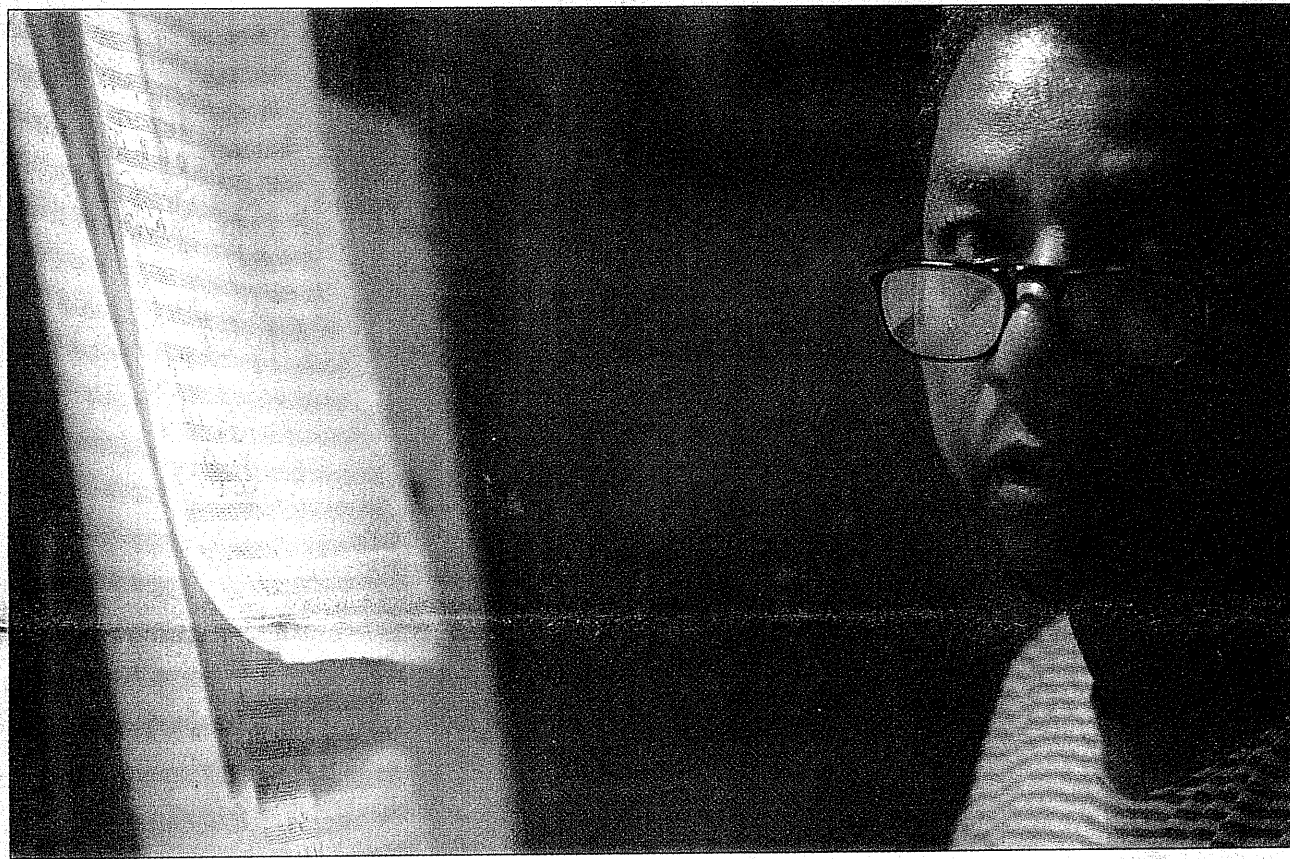
"I would have to invent myself," the Atlanta composer says without a moment's hesitation.

It's a revealing reply, because in many ways Singleton has done just that — invented himself as a composer of intellectual art music in the European tradition. Singleton soaked up the tradition while living in Italy and Austria, but his roots are in Brooklyn, where the heroes of his youth were jazz men like Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. That rich combination of influences has given him an orchestral voice and sound that couldn't be confused with any other composer.

Nowadays, Singleton is on a roll. He's in the midst of a period in which he has been commissioned to write music for the likes of the Cleveland, Philadelphia and Houston orchestras. This week, the Florida Orchestra will perform the premiere of his *Cara Mia Gwen*, which was commissioned to commemorate the orchestra's 25th anniversary.

As his background suggests, Singleton doesn't fit the popular image of a contemporary composer of classical music. That would probably be somebody like Elliott Carter, whose complex music is

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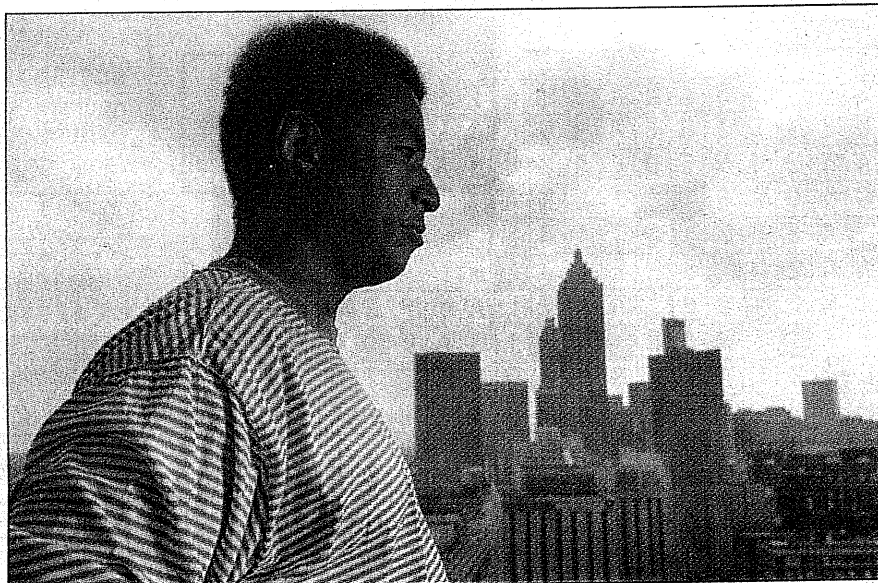


Photos by Michael A. Schwarz

**MUSIC MAN:** Composer Alvin Singleton works on a composition at his studio in Atlanta. This week, the Florida Orchestra will perform the premiere of his work, *Cara Mia Gwen*.

"I sometimes feel like I'm in two worlds. The symphony people are in one tower, the jazz people are in another tower, and I go back and forth between them. I know both worlds very well, and they basically have the same goal — to get out a good tune, to write a good lick."

— Alvin Singleton



## Composer from 1F

admired by university professors but is inaccessible to a lay audience. The popular image of a classical composer would certainly be white.

Singleton, 52, doesn't fit the image not just because he is African-American, but also because he is so down to earth. Instead of tweeds and a necktie, he favors blue jeans and a golf shirt. At the Kinko's on Peachtree Street near his apartment building in midtown Atlanta, he jokes around with the kids behind the counter as he waits for a score to be photocopied.

Though Singleton's manner is casual, he has serious reading habits — it's not unusual to find something like a volume of Juvenal's poetry by the easy chair in his living room — as well as a glittering resume that includes a master's degree from Yale, a Fulbright Scholarship and enough other commissions, fellowships and honors to fill seven pages.

Singleton composes sophisticated, technically polished music, with ever-shifting rhythmic and harmonic structures that reward close listening. However, unlike the mathematically inclined works that turned off a generation of middle-brow audiences in the '50s and '60s, his music plainly seeks to communicate, even to entertain.

"I think average listeners like Alvin's music a lot," says Carman Moore, a New York composer and music critic who wrote the liner notes for an Elektra/Nonesuch CD of Singleton works performed by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. "You don't need to know where he's getting his notes from, as you need to know in the music of Milton Babbitt or somebody like that. You don't notice that there's dissonance. People like the drama of the way he stages things and the clarity of his forms. He's a composer who lets his audience in on what's going on."

Singleton acknowledges as much by recalling the premiere of his orchestral work *Again*, performed by the London Sinfonietta in Graz, Austria, in 1979. "*Again* has a percussion solo, and one of my proudest moments was when a kid in the audience came up and said, 'You stole that from Santana, didn't you?' I didn't, of course, but I understood that he understood the style. That's why I was particularly moved."

Because Singleton's main stock in trade is composing for symphony orchestras, it's not surprising to find pictures of some of the giants of classical music — Beethoven, Mahler and Leontyne Price — on the walls of the workroom in his apartment. But there are just as many pictures of jazz giants, including Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Singleton's choice of pictures reflects his anomalous position as an African-American creating music for a 19th-century European institution.

"I sometimes feel like I'm in two worlds," he says. "The symphony people are in one tower, the jazz people are in another tower, and I go back and forth between them. I know both worlds very well, and they basically have the same goal — to get out a good tune, to write a good lick."

Critics tend to discuss Singleton's music in terms of jazz, but the composer doesn't really think that's right. "They hear something familiar and they know I'm black, so they use that label," he says. "It doesn't bother me. Jazz and classical music really go side by side. Miles Davis was like Stravinsky in

## AT A GLANCE

Alvin Singleton's *Cara Mia Gwen* will be premiered by the Florida Orchestra, music director Jahja Ling conducting. Also on the program will be Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5 (Emperor)*, featuring Emanuel Ax, and Debussy's *La Mer*. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Thursday at the Carr Performing Arts Center in Orlando; 8 p.m. Friday at Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center; 8 p.m. Saturday at Mahaffey Theater; and 7 p.m. Nov. 9 at Ruth Eckerd Hall. Tickets are \$19-\$30. Call 286-2403 in Hillsborough or (800) 662-7286.

To hear a sample of Singleton's music, call Timesline. Check the directory on 2F for the phone number in your area, then dial category 7260.

the sense that both of them were always exploring something new."

Jazz was Singleton's first love when he was growing up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. His father was a city bus driver, and his mother taught in the public schools. "My parents had a large record collection — Nat King Cole, spirituals," he says. "We had a piano, and when I was taking lessons what really appealed to me was Bach. But I didn't have a classical background at all. My heroes in the neighborhood were jazz musicians."

He sang in a Methodist church choir, played trumpet in the high school marching band and was the pianist in a jazz combo, but music didn't seem like a practical option after his high school graduation in 1959. He went to work in an accounting firm. "The accounting fed into what I had been taught — get a good steady job," he says. "Music at that point was still the silent ambition."

Singleton eventually began studying piano and harmony at the New York College of Music (now part of New York University). It was a small school on the upper East Side of Manhattan where "all the teachers had German names," he says. "In 1963, I did two things. I quit my accounting job and I enrolled full time. Then I told my parents. They went nuts."

Two jobs he held while going to college contributed to his education as a composer. First, he worked as a page in the music division of the New York public library, where he got acquainted with the vast collection of scores and music reference books. He also ushered at concerts of the New York Philharmonic, which was enjoying a golden age in the '60s under music director Leonard Bernstein.

"The standard repertoire — the first time I heard it, I heard it live. That was my introduction," Singleton says. "When I heard Mahler the first time, I heard his *Second Symphony* and thought I would die. Bernstein was so emotional, so dramatic. He'd come off-stage after a performance dripping wet with sweat, crying."

Singleton studied with some distinguished composer/teachers, and two of them had backgrounds similar to his own. Hall Overton and Mel Powell were both jazz pianists who gravitated toward classical music.

"Overton once told me, 'Your music is full of jazz structures, and you should do more of it,'" Singleton says. "Hearing that was very important to me, because I had not come to terms with it in my own head. I still thought the classical world was this, and the jazz world was that."

Powell, who played in Benny Goodman's band, left popular music to study and teach at Yale. Singleton responded to Powell's easy-going encouragement.