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# arts



## Alvin Singleton composing in the key of life



**Atlantan creates music that's at once deep and accessible, raw and 'ultra-refined'**

By **PIERRE RUHE**  
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Lunch in a tony Midtown restaurant with Alvin Singleton brings advice on creativity and leading the good life. "An artist should fill his subconscious *now*. It'll all get processed in here" — he taps a graying temple — "and come out when it needs to."

Between spoonfuls of wild mushroom soup, he continues, "A friend of mine, a composer, scolded me once — this was when I was living in Europe — and told me to stay at home and write music, not to go out for lunches and dinners with friends all the time. He's a good composer, but he doesn't get it: It's all about living."

Singleton went to Rome for a year as a Fulbright scholar in the early 1970s. He wound up staying in Europe for 14 years, living mostly in Vienna and Graz, Austria. The experience abroad, he has said, "saved my life."

"To be a composer is an honorable and respected tradition there," he explains. "I also felt like I had escaped the racism of the United States."

In Paris, Singleton encountered conductor Robert Shaw, who offered the Brooklyn-born composer a reason to come back to America: a stint as composer-in-residence at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. It was a distinguished position that, while not catapulting him to fame, gave him national recognition and undeniable respect.

Singleton held the ASO post for three years (1985-88), followed by a similar position at Spelman College (1988-91). He's also worked as composer-in-residence with the Detroit Symphony and as a visiting professor at Yale.

Since moving to Atlanta in 1985, he's been the city's most esteemed composer.

This week, the ASO formally restores its connections to Singleton, as Music Director Robert Spano conducts the composer's "PraiseMaker" in three concerts, beginning Thursday.

### CONCERT PREVIEW

**Atlanta Symphony Orchestra**

8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday  
\$19-\$57. Symphony Hall,  
1280 Peachtree St. N.E.  
404-733-5000, [www.atlantasymphony.org](http://www.atlantasymphony.org).

Composer **Alvin Singleton's** "PraiseMaker," a 20-minute cantata that one critic has called "linear and engaging," will be performed this week by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, where Singleton was composer-in-residence from 1985 to 1988.

RICH ADDICKS / Staff

**“** I like to make the most out of little. That should be the goal of all creative artists. How much material do you need to make art? My only concern is **the idea of the piece.**

That's it.

► Please see **SINGLETON, L2**



# Singleton, ASO together again

► Continued from L1

With a text by writer and filmmaker Susan Kouguell, "PraiseMaker" is a 20-minute cantata for chorus and orchestra. Its construction is unelaborate: the choir, for example, often sings in simple, single blocks, with few opportunities for virtuosic display. Yet the simplicity of its unfolding — a Singleton trademark — belies a shrewd sense of communication.

Following its 1998 world premiere — commissioned for the 125th anniversary of the Cincinnati May Festival — one critic called "PraiseMaker" the composer's "finest work," describing it as "linear and engaging, with some dense and expansive chords that linger in the memory."

Singleton's best pieces often do that. In 1989, for example, the ASO released an all-Singleton disc, led by Shaw and former ASO principal guest conductor Louis Lane, on the Nonesuch label — a CD that has proved the composer's best calling card. It includes "A Yellow Rose Petal," his first large orchestral work. Written for the Houston Symphony, it upends notions of Texas machismo with fragile, quiet phrases defeating the bullying power of the full orchestra.

Another work on the disc, "After Fallen Crumbs," is an elaboration of an earlier choral piece, based on a Hindu proverb: "An ant can feed a family with the fallen crumbs of an elephant." The orchestral score, completed in Atlanta in 1987, is dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"After Fallen Crumbs" opens with trum-

pets blaring a fanfare, a thick spread of bleating brass and, later, wistful, cooing phrases from the woodwinds. What starts big gets small, then opens up again. Yet there's a psychological twist: For most of the work's six minutes, insistent timpani strokes compete with the main story, as if someone is knocking urgently at the door and the people inside ignore it, as if Death himself were trying to enter.

What does it all mean? Singleton is reluctant to deconstruct his own music: "I figure it's better just to let people hear my music and decide for themselves," he shrugs.

"After Fallen Crumbs" is gutsy, almost coarse writing, not overly concerned with polish. Anti-slick. Ideas trying to escape. Its rawness makes it impossible to ignore. Unlike most American composers who write in an audience-friendly style, Singleton's music is not indebted to that overblown, overripe Hollywood-soundtrack sound.

"Alvin is anxious to make his music playable," conductor Lane says. "It has a sophisticated point of view, but it's written to be performed. That's one of the things that attracts conductors to it. You know an audience won't lose their way listening to it."

Singleton's latest disc, where he sounds perfectly at home, is a fine collection of chamber pieces called "Somehow We Can," on the influential new-music Tzadik label. The title track, for string quartet, contrasts two worlds in sound: a spinning restlessness and a frozen still life. The strongest work is "Again," written in 1979 and on



Alvin Singleton chats with fellow composer Philip Glass at a conference in New York in 1993. "We were talking about life," Singleton recalls. "He's very philosophical, you know."

this recording played with crackling energy and atmosphere. Some of Singleton's influences are evident, including the cool, edgy modernism of György Ligeti and the rhythmically unsteady jazz modernism of John Coltrane.

When writing music, Singleton starts with a single idea, a cell, and focuses on that alone. "Alvin will explore it, flesh it out, and then go back and erase what's not essential," says Steven Everett, co-director of Atlanta new-music ensemble Thamyris and chairman of Emory University's music department. "It leaves an ultra-refined, almost crystalline and poetic statement. The ideas pop out at you. And it seems the older he gets, the more he erases."

As the composer, 61, explains, "You have to do a lot of thinking, then spill everything out on the page, look at it and rearrange it. I manipulate what's on paper, play around with it on the piano. Back and forth. It's a struggle, it's really hard work and drives me crazy when someone tells me I'm at home having fun. I'm really not — I sometimes feel I'm risking my life for a tune."

## Becoming 'the foreigner'

Singleton shares a narrow Midtown townhouse with Lisa Cooper, his wife of seven years. He works every day, in the mornings, in a cozy second-floor studio whose bay windows are shaded by a pair of tall sycamores. He composes on a large architect's desk. A pair of bifocals dangle from a retractable desk lamp. Large composition pads are scattered about, with his most recent composition, "Say We Have This Ball of Meaning," for chorus and orchestra, on top. It will premiere in November at New York's Merkin Hall, in a concert devoted to Singleton's music.

Surprisingly for a composer, Singleton's piano, a shiny black Yamaha disklavier, sits one floor below his studio, in the living room. The instrument looks and functions like a regular upright piano but also has a computer inside to record what's being played. It can then replay it and even transfer the exact keyboard movements to computer diskette.

As if staring hopelessly at the blinking "12:00" on an unprogrammed VCR, Singleton looks at the gizmo and admits he doesn't much use it. "I'm still a horse-and-carriage composer," he says. "I still write with pencil and paper at my desk. I use the piano in spurts, trying out sounds."

Beside the Yamaha are CD racks of thorny modernist masters: Carter, Ligeti, Penderecki, Nono. Upstairs, on his studio wall of shelves, sit art books (tormented expressionist Egon Schiele is a favorite), scores and volumes about composers, from 19th-century French romantic Hector Berlioz to still-active German electronic composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. Also on the shelves: "The Power of Black Music" by Samuel Floyd and Courtlander's "Negro Folk Music USA."

"Americans benefit from all our traditions," Singleton says, acknowledging his collection's diversity. "When people call me an African-American composer, it's limiting. It negates all my influences. What they're really doing is saying, 'You must write a particular kind of music,' and I don't accept that."

He continues, "When I was in Austria, it's funny, people didn't have expectations about me because I'm black like you get accustomed to, and hide from, here in the United States. You had to prove yourself, as you do when you're new in any community. But I felt a transition from the newspapers, from the way the critics would describe me. I went from being the foreigner — 'Alvin Singleton, the American' — to 'our Alvin Singleton.' I read that and had to put down the paper."

As he shakes his head in wonder at that memory, Singleton's voice suddenly takes on a wistful quality. "It was important to become the foreigner. I learned more about being an American, and being a New Yorker, by living abroad than I did at home. You realize what you already knew about yourself, but from another cultural point of view."

## 'A silent ambition'

Alvin Singleton was born in 1940 and raised in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. His father was a city bus driver and his mother a teacher. As a boy he sang in the Methodist church choir, played trumpet in a marching band and sat in a jazz combo, on piano. "The first music I was interested in and participated in, seriously, was jazz," he says. "That's still the prism through which I see all other music."

But music wasn't a practical career, his

parents told him. So after high school he found a job in an accounting firm. "Get a good steady job is what I'd been taught. Music, at that point, was a silent ambition."

When he quit his job and enrolled, in 1963, in the New York College of Music — now part of New York University — his parents, naturally, "went nuts." But soon the pieces started falling into place. He became a page in the New York Public Library's music division, handling scores, and an usher at New York Philharmonic concerts, electrified by Leonard Bernstein and his glamorous, heart-on-the-sleeve explorations of music.

After graduating from NYCM, and a few years of private study, Singleton found a kindred spirit in a Yale University professor. Mel Powell had played piano in jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman's band. He encouraged Singleton toward freer expression, away from unforgiving categories. "Before this, I thought classical music was one thing and jazz something different entirely," Singleton says. "That the two were one in my head hadn't yet occurred to me." After earning a master's degree at Yale, he received the Fulbright that sent him to Italy.

"Some of the criticism that American composers get from Europeans is that we're too eclectic," Thamyris' Everett observes. "But Alvin tends to focus his sounds, and it's a richer, organic flow of ideas." Despite his very American, musically polyglot upbringing, "he's got an aesthetic that's almost more European than American."

Thamyris has been a leading champion of Singleton's music, having performed more than 10 of his pieces over the years. The ensemble's co-director, percussionist Peggy Benkeser, has played in many of them, including the premiere last February of "Argor VIII," for solo snare drum.

"The vocabulary of his music doesn't alienate the listener," Benkeser says. "Alvin's music always *sounds* good."

## The Chinese-cooking approach

Where Singleton has earned some criticism is in the way he approaches large compositions. Some musicians mumble under their breath that he will write an orchestral piece that doesn't realize the ensemble's strengths, as if he thinks only in terms of smaller forces — perhaps a chamber ensemble, not a 100-piece orchestra.

Singleton shrugs off the criticism. "I like to make the most out of little," he says. "That should be the goal of all creative artists. How much material do you need to make art? My only concern is the idea of the piece. That's it."

"Because of the ASO appointment," Everett says, Singleton may have "had to write several large-scale orchestral works whether or not he was ready." But the orchestral pieces are "what made his reputation," Everett points out. "When you speak nationally and internationally, Alvin's name is in those big orchestral pieces."

That reputation remains small, if serious. According to his publisher, European American Music, Singleton's works are performed somewhere in America, on average, only about once a month; in Europe they are performed much less.

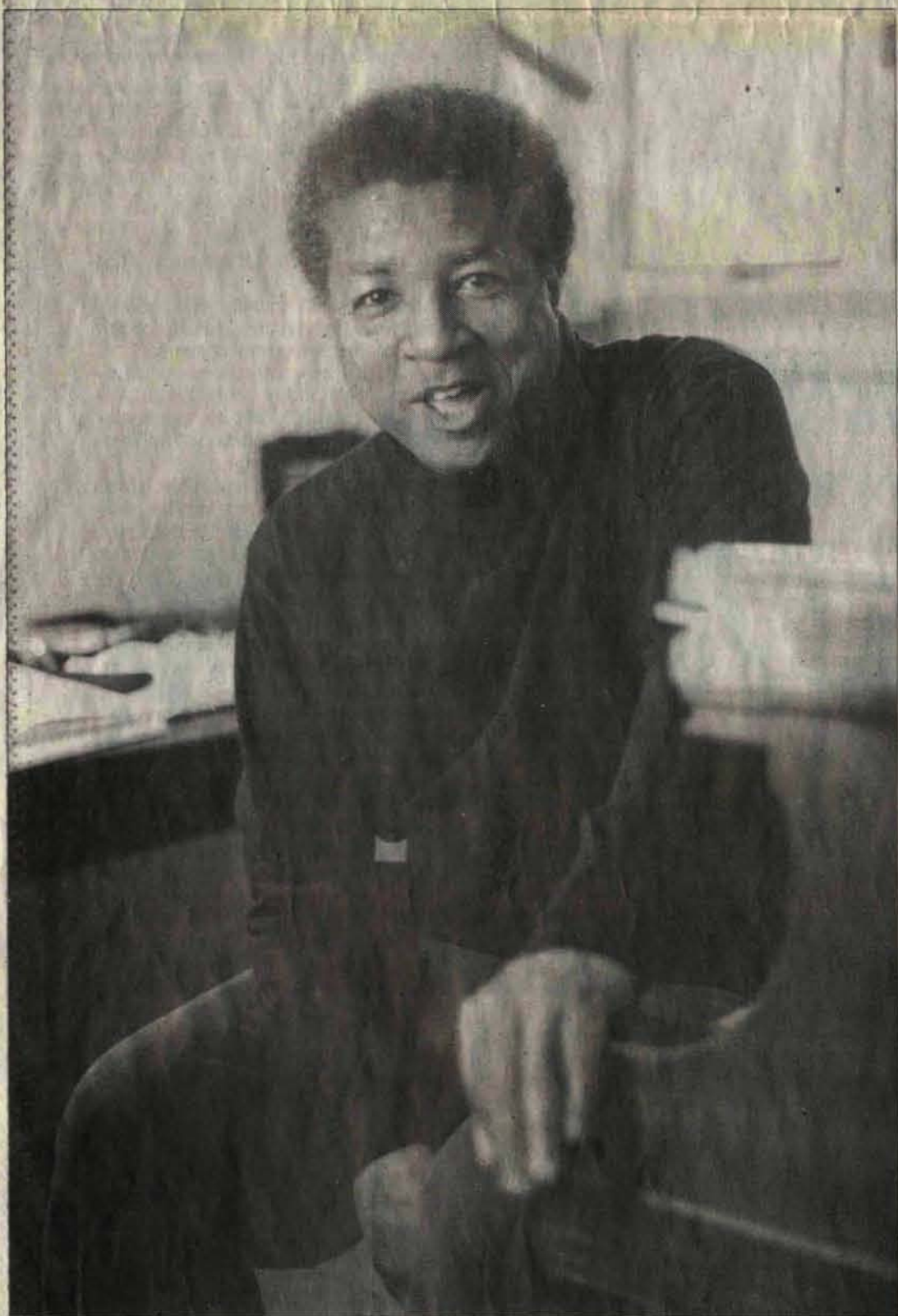
While many composers wish for dual approval — artistic respect and popularity — Singleton says his music comes out the only way it can. "When I look back at my earlier works, I sometimes see what I didn't spell out," he reflects. "But the theory of a piece comes only after the vision, the creative impulse. It can't happen any other way."

His style also asks a lot from musicians and audiences. "Despite his titles, I don't think Alvin writes a detailed program for his music; he doesn't try to lead you through it step by step," says Benkeser. "It's almost like he leaves room for participation for the player and also the audience. There's structure in his music, but it's not obvious. You have to fill it in, and that creates a tension in his music. It's very intriguing."

While his music is full of complex ideas, Singleton, ever insouciant, maintains a philosophy of simplicity. "Composing should be like Chinese cooking. You prepare everything first, get the ingredients in order, then throw it all in the pan to cook. That's how you write a play, too. You create these characters and let them fend for themselves in the drama. It all needs to be organic. Being an artist isn't a profession, it's a way of life."

► ON THE WEB: [www.eamoc.com/10.html](http://www.eamoc.com/10.html)

I manipulate what's on paper, play around with it on the piano. Back and forth. It's a struggle, it's really hard work and drives me crazy when someone tells me I'm at home having fun. I'm really not — I sometimes feel I'm risking my life for a tune.



Joanna E. Morrissey

## THE ALVIN SINGLETON FILE

► **Born:** Dec. 28, 1940, in New York. "I'm an Atlantan now, but whenever I go home to see my mother in Brooklyn, I immediately fall back in line."

► **Home life:** His wife of seven years, Lisa Cooper, is an assistant U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Georgia. They have no chil-

dren and no pets. "Lisa wants a dog so badly. But if we got one, I'd be the one stuck with it — I'm home most of the day."

► **On his work:** "As a composer, you spend your life really just writing one piece, with each score representing a different stage of development. A novelist is the same, a whole life writing and rewriting the same book. It's your life there on the page."