

by Kyle Gann

The orchestral success of Alvin Singleton baffles me, for the same reason that I'm surprised by the continuing popularity of Sibelius. I consider myself a connoisseur of exotic and peculiar tastes suggestive of insight superior to that of the average classical music lover. I love Sibelius for his quirks, his austere independence, his counterintuitive gestures, so foreign to all previous orchestral rhetoric. He's the kind of composer I would expect to be a specialty, a maven's obscure delight, and it dilutes my pleasure in him slightly that he is so widely appreciated by people who otherwise savor Tchaikovsky and Grieg.

Likewise, Singleton is hardly the kind



of bombastic purveyor of *moto perpetuo* percussion who makes a splash in concert-openers, and even less the kind of highly technical composer faintly praised by academics. His music is soulful, with an understated simplicity that I particularly prize and that I would expect the oh-so-superficial classical music world to crassly

misunderstand. I want him to be ignored and underrated so I can knowingly laud him as far better than the current run of orchestral racehorses. But somehow, despite his music's poignant subtlety, his reputation needs no help from the likes of me. He's doing just fine.

So I am forced to conclude that there are conductors? managers? audiences? out there thirsting for new classical music that is long on substance and short on bells and whistles. Singleton's music is often slow, at the beginning of pieces almost motionless. American orchestral composers aren't supposed to be slow. That's soulful Eastern Europe territory, for religious types who suffered under

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Communism: Arvo Pärt, Giya Kancheli, Henryk Gorecki, Ljubica Marić. Yet Singleton's music, for all its Atlanta-based Americanness (though he did spend a long, crucial part of his career in Austria) is sometimes leisurely to the point of stillness. An opening gesture will appear to be a starting point, but rather than develop, it will simply repeat. Often an entire piece can be parsed out in a small list of gestures that occur over and over again.

Take *Shadows* (1987), so typical yet special and recognizable that one might call it Singleton's signature orchestral work. It begins in a low E drone in the double basses that will last for some 271 measures—at which point it begins slowly

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undulating between E and G. Above this, enter chords in the flutes and harp: C major, E-flat major, A major—these chords will continue through to the end of the piece, so slowly that the ear doesn't register their 20-measure-long repeated pattern. The music seems more "paced" than composed, its imperceptible momentum inscrutable. A trumpet enters with a dotted motto; this motto will recur every 13 measures for a long, long time. *Shadows's* most ravishing feature is the irresistible gradualness of its crescendo, which gathers energy with each new element.

A continuum of repeated figures recurring at regular intervals? One finds such processes in John Adams's music (*Lolla-*

*paloosa*, for a major example), as well as in that of postminimalist composers such as William Duckworth, Rhys Chatham, Mikel Rouse. Yet somehow, *Shadows*, and all of Singleton's music, escapes the bouncy, impersonal momentum associated with minimalism. His sonorities are too luminous, his melodies too tentative, and his music builds up into climaxes of conflict and violence. He even uses multiple repetition of sections at times, but with such complex textures that only the most attentive listener will notice the device. Somewhat like Morton Feldman, who fused a thoroughgoing atonal pitch vocabulary with the aimless Cagean aesthetic, Singleton adopted the listener-friendly economy of minimalism, but

managed to keep it within the nuanced emotive world of the New Romanticism. His success comes from having combined the best of two opposing aesthetics.

The soulfulness of Singleton's music doesn't much stem from jazz influences, as one might expect of an African-American composer, but he does sometimes tackle social issues. He wrote his choral piece *Truth* on a text about Sojourner Truth written by his composer friend Carman Moore (whom I recently wrote about in this column). Singleton's *Jasper Drag* for violin, clarinet, and piano (2000) was named for Jasper, Texas, where, on a summer day in 1998, three white men chained a black man to their

pickup truck and dragged him to a painful death. The piece is not pictorial, though some of its elements express anger, such as a recurring group of accelerating quintuplets in the violin. Others are more static, such as a tentatively syncopated melody in the clarinet and an undulating major second in the piano, but continuity is built by placing these elements next to each other in a collage-like fashion. The most impressive item in Singleton's craft is that he can create such cumulatively dramatic and satisfying forms with such self-contained, nondeveloping elements.

Like Messiaen, Feldman, and Ralph Shapey, Singleton is ultimately an imagist. He doesn't have a system or syntax he

works within; there's no detailed grammar to his music (though there are large octatonic-scale passages in *Shadows* and his 1998 choral work, *PraiseMaker*). Instead, he composes figures—like the patterns of staccato septuplets that the winds keep returning to in *Praise-Maker*—and dots the piece with them. Virtually everything you hear, you will hear again, possibly in a regular pattern, perhaps more irregularly, perhaps not until the end of the piece. As he aptly said in an interview, "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."

It's a fairly austere method, somewhat Sibelius-like, but it is generous to the listener with its plethora of identifiable landmarks. Singleton has been criticized for not using the orchestra more idiomatically, and to its full advantage. Yet despite the studied economy of his means and the set character of his images, the music is never cold (as Messiaen occasionally is) nor abstract (as Feldman often is). It glows with warmth, it hovers in the air, it paces itself with a glacial but palpably intuitive momentum. It refuses to pander to either academicism or populism, but is so honest and self-assured that listeners flock to it anyway.

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