

New American homecoming

The work of Atlanta's premier classical composer, a former DJ raised on jazz, returns to the ASO after a 12-year absence

BY KEELY BROWN

TO THOSE in the know, composer Alvin Singleton is Atlanta's best-kept secret.

But it's no secret that, when it comes to the fine arts, Atlanta tends to under-appreciate its own. After all, the great choral conductor Robert Shaw received appropriate attention only at the end of his long career with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and local singers with national and international careers remain untapped by the city's few professional operatic companies.

In keeping with this domestic dismissiveness — plus a decade where the performance of contemporary American music wasn't a high priority — the ASO hasn't performed anything by the internationally famous Singleton in 12 years.

Until now.

Thanks to new ASO music director Robert Spano's creative programming, the Midtown resident — who has been played by nearly every major orchestra in the world — will have a hearing at Symphony Hall once again this week.

For Singleton, it's been worth the wait.

"You always want to be played by your home orchestra," says the composer, a Brooklyn native who has lived in Atlanta since 1985. "Robert Spano asked me, 'What would you like for us to perform

of yours?' And for me, this was a no-brainer. I've always wanted to have a work performed by the ASO Chorus — I call it God's chorus."

That work, "PraiseMaker," was originally commissioned in 1998 by conductor James Conlon for the 125th anniversary of the Cincinnati May Festival. Conceptually harkening back to the "praise singers" of Africa, oral historians and traditional storytellers, "PraiseMaker" is scored for traditional symphony orchestra, but with a Singleton signature difference: a percussion section rich with the exotic sounds of temple bells, tubular bells and vibraphone. The work conveys its message — a celebration of the gift of memory — through a simple, almost minimalist text by poet Susan Kouguell. "Her poetry is so straightforward, you don't have to figure it out," says Singleton.

Despite his music's lengthy absence from ASO programs, the composer's connection with, and admiration for, the orchestra goes far beyond its chorus. "The ASO is very much an American orchestra, started by American conductors and musicians, as compared to some of the older ones that are a continuation of the European tradition," Singleton says. "To me, it's in the top five, because American musicians can play anything. Other orchestras — they can really play Mozart and Beethoven, but their

Copland triplets won't function like jazz, which is where Copland's triplets came from. The ASO can play anything they want."

The orchestra's chameleon-like quality is well-suited to a new generation of composers who refuse to be stamped stylistically and resist all attempts to fit into traditional genres.

TO SOME, Singleton's voice as a composer might seem a study in contrasts. As an African-American, he sometimes combines the musical sounds of his heritage with his classical leanings, yet in a subtle way — and without making it an agenda to do so.

Though he's known for imaginative percussion scoring — he once wrote a snare drum solo work for Atlanta percussion artist Peggy Benkeser — Singleton's music is essentially lyric-driven. Contemporary, but with the necessary element of surprise always lurking around the corner, his work shouts 20th-century American — but the rhythms

and harmonic elements whisper jazz, and give more than a passing nod to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. And its no wonder — two of Singleton's composition teachers in the early 1960s were jazz-turned-classical composers Hall Overton and Mel Powell.

Raised in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, Singleton grew up listening to his parents' collection of 78s, which included the likes of Nat King Cole,

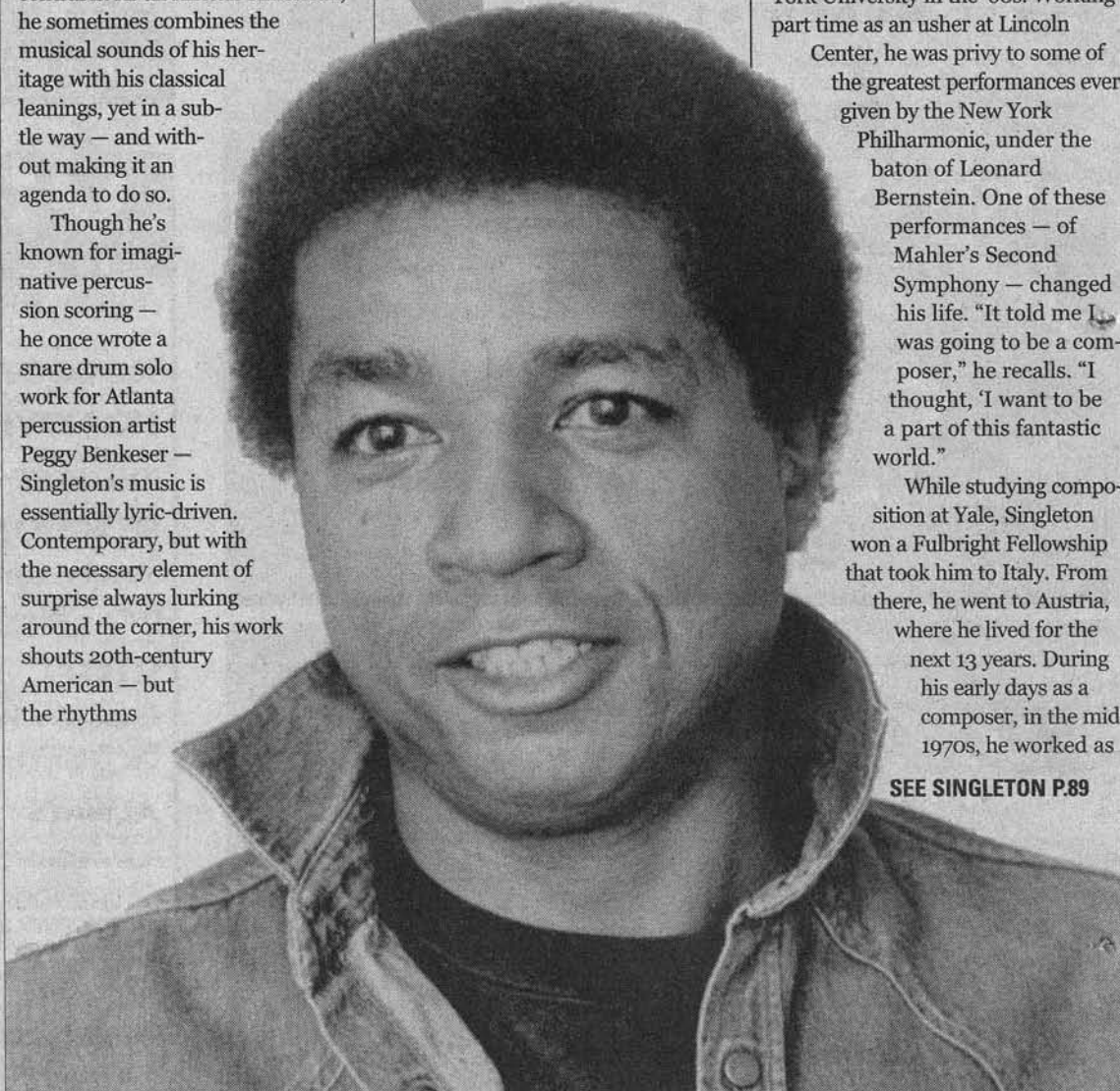
Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. Encouraged by his parents and their friends — many of whom were professional jazz musicians, he went to the legendary clubs of the '50s — the Five Spot and Birdland — and listened to Thelonius Monk, Charlie Mingus and Horace Silver, as well as Davis and Coltrane. These were the musical impressions that later shaped his work.

Singleton's musical career turned to composition while he was at New York University in the '60s. Working part time as an usher at Lincoln

Center, he was privy to some of the greatest performances ever given by the New York Philharmonic, under the baton of Leonard Bernstein. One of these performances — of Mahler's Second Symphony — changed his life. "It told me I was going to be a composer," he recalls. "I thought, 'I want to be a part of this fantastic world.'"

While studying composition at Yale, Singleton won a Fulbright Fellowship that took him to Italy. From there, he went to Austria, where he lived for the next 13 years. During his early days as a composer, in the mid-1970s, he worked as

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PRAISE-WORTHY: Alvin Singleton's distinctly American sound finds a perfect match in the ASO.

SINGLETON FROM P.87

a DJ in an Austrian discotheque, spinning Latin dance music. "I had a great following," he laughs. "And these same kids came to my concerts. They thought it was phenomenal that I could do both."

He didn't have to do both for long. To a new generation of listeners, his work evoked a blending of European concert hall classicism with American contemporary inflections strongly influenced by jazz — an irresistible combination for a post-John Cage audience seeking something more stimulating, and musically gratifying, than early minimalism.

As the smaller European ensembles began to play Singleton, the larger ones took notice. By the mid-'80s, he was receiving debuts at top-flight ensembles such as the Orchestre de Paris.

But it wasn't enough. It wasn't an American career.

"In spite of it all, I thought, 'It's not home,'" he says. "I was hoping to come back, but at the same time I didn't know how I was going to. When you're away 14 years, you come back into a situation that's completely changed. You know that the composer list has been piling up while you've gone, and you've got to find a place for yourself."

Luckily, that place was found for him. A decade earlier, New York composer John Duffy had established the "Meet the Composer" program, which gave American conductors the opportunity to create composer-residency programs within their orchestras. In 1984, Singleton received a telegram from the organization, saying that the ASO's famed conductor/choral director Robert Shaw was interested in bringing him to Atlanta.

"It came from nowhere," Singleton recalls. "There I was, just living my life in Vienna. When I got the telegram, I thought, 'There is a God.' Shaw and I met for half an hour in Paris — and my whole life changed."

He spent three years at the ASO, 1985-'88, followed by resident composer stints at Spelman College ('88-'91) and then with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. During these years, he met and married assistant U.S. attorney, and Atlanta resident, Lisa Cooper. These events cemented his resolve to stay in his adopted hometown.

"This is a good place to work, and there's a terrific airport if I need to go somewhere," he explains. "There's no pressing reason to leave."

In fact, during a recent semester teaching composition at Yale University, Singleton commuted back and forth. "That's a testimony to my dedication toward staying here," he laughs.

NOW 61, Singleton is among the most-performed living American composers in today's concert halls. He is commissioned regularly by groups as diverse as the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Kronos Quartet. One recent work, the string quartet

"Somehow We Can," was recently released by avant-garde composer John Zorn's super-hip independent label, Tzadik.

His current project is a commission from the Mutable Music organization, which is sponsoring an evening of his compositions later this year at New York's Merkin Hall. The new piece, a look at the individual's approach to prayer, is scored for string orchestra, baritone, percussion — and accordion.

"For me, anything is a challenge," Singleton says of his signature eclecticism. "You can give me a glass harmonica and a pile of bricks."

Although his works continue to be likened to a cross between contemporary American classical and jazz, Singleton claims that he makes no distinctions between the two genres. "But it's hard to grow up in a society where Ellington lived and not be influenced by him," he admits. "And I listen to everything. I tell performers to listen to Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald if they want to hear how to phrase, because the singing voice is the greatest instrument."

Singleton still maintains his musical ties to Europe, which has helped foster his objective common-sense approach to the state of music in America.

"You can't compare America to Europe," he asserts. "We have developed so much — look at jazz, and electronic music, and minimalism. We've created genres. But by the same token, classical music has nothing to do with the daily listening habits of Americans. That's why our orchestras have to play more American music — because its language is in the ear of every American. A person who listens to rock every day will recognize the language of American composers."

While Singleton considers himself lucky to be one of the most commissioned American composers of his generation, he asserts that a composer's best works often are the non-commissioned pieces. "You have to remember why you do what you do," he says. "Being an artist is not a profession. It's a way of life. You should never confuse it with making a living, because that's when compromise steps in. You do it because you can't help yourself. If I'm being performed, it's wonderful. If not, I'm still gonna get up in the morning and write my music."

The future of American orchestras — and the key to their survival — is going to involve more attentive, skillful programming, with a stronger, more prevalent mix of both the old and the new. In this new direction, the ASO is off to a running start. If more orchestras follow its lead, composers like Singleton will finally take their rightful place in the chronology of American classical music — and get the hearing they deserve. ♦

KEELY.BROWN@CREATIVELOAFING.COM

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra presents Alvin Singleton's "PraiseMaker," Thurs.-Sat., May 23-25, at Atlanta Symphony Hall, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St. Robert Spano conducts, and tenor Richard Clement joins the ASO Chorus. 8 p.m. \$19-\$48. 404-733-5000. www.atlantasympphony.org.



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