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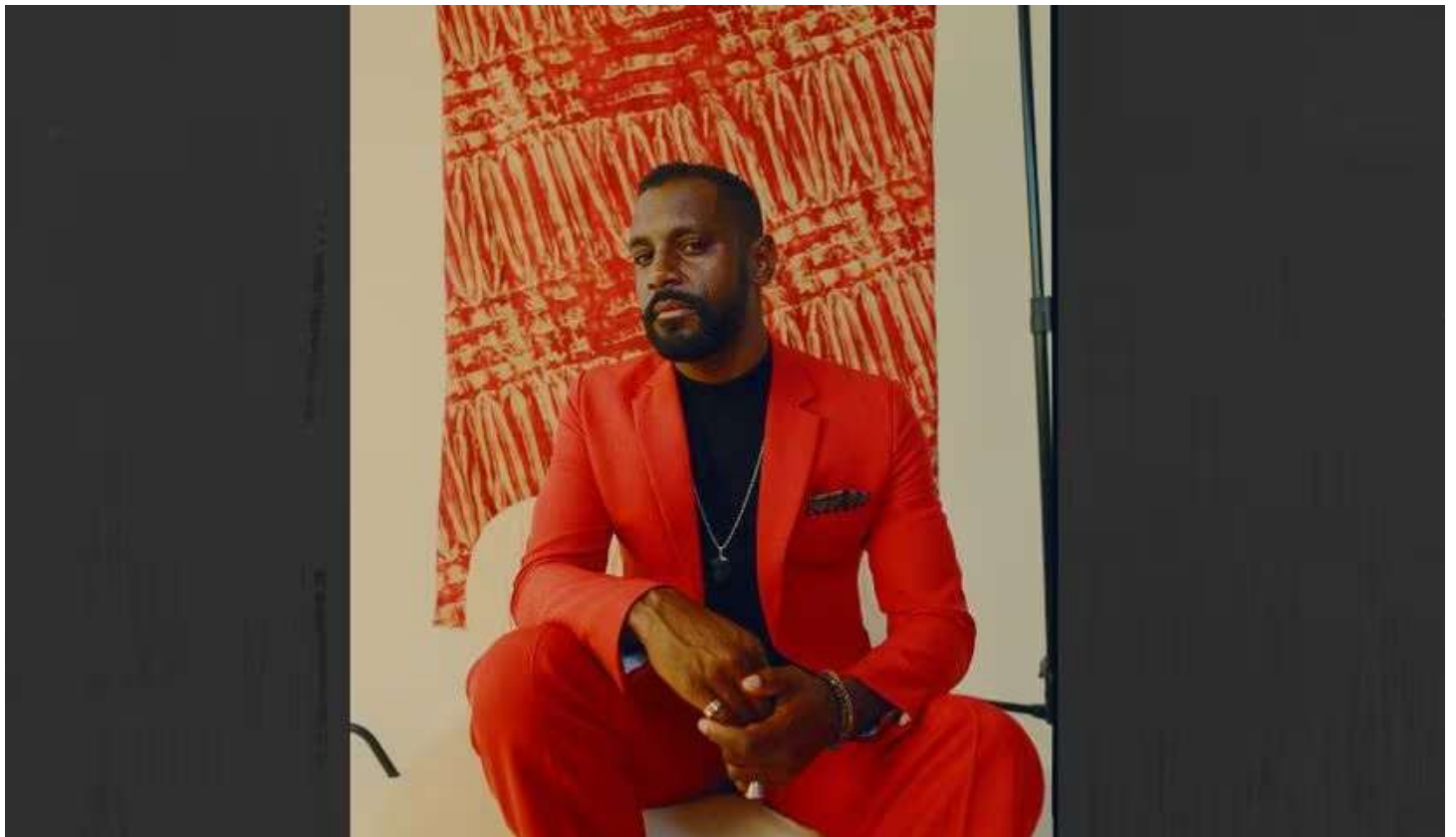


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THINGS TO DO

Carlos Simon's first showcase with ASO a true homecoming

Morehouse and Spelman glee clubs join soloists and spoken word artist.



Credit: Polyarts

Composer Carlos Simon. Courtesy of Polyarts



Before the 37-year-old worked as music director for Jennifer Holiday, began his recently extended tenure as composer-in-residence at the John F. Kennedy Center or received a 2023 Grammy nod for “Requiem for the Enslaved,” Simon got his start as an accompanist at his father’s church on Hollywood Road in Atlanta. Back then, he didn’t think writing music was in his future, but that changed when he got to know the hometown symphony while a student at Morehouse College and Georgia State University.

“Growing up I didn’t have the chance to see the ASO. My parents didn’t have the funds to take five kids to see the Atlanta symphony,” said Simon.

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He first experienced the ASO as a member of the Morehouse College Glee Club during annual holiday concerts. “I actually remember saying to my teacher, after hearing the orchestra in rehearsal, ‘Dr. Morrow, I want to write for this orchestra; how do I do that?’”

While the ASO has programmed Simon compositions in recent seasons, organizers have rarely given over an entire evening to an Atlanta-based composer. So Simon will return to Symphony Hall Feb. 15-16 as a hometown classical hero for a personally curated evening of his works. Led by guest conductor Jonathan Taylor Rush, the program also features spoken word artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph, soprano Kearstin Piper Brown and baritone Brian K. Major, along with the glee clubs of Spelman and Morehouse colleges. Joseph, Piper Brown and Major are all also graduates of Spelman and Morehouse.



Spelman College Glee Club. AJC File

The concert will open with “Ring Shout,” an orchestral work from Simon’s “Four Black American Dances,” to establish the evening as a communal gathering full of music-making, Simon said. To close the concert, the ASO performs Simon and Bamuthi Joseph’s “brea(d)th,” an epic work commissioned in memory of George Floyd. Both compositions are relatively new works. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra will give the second-ever performance of “brea(d)th” — Decca Classics released a live recording of “brea(d)th” by the Minnesota Orchestra last year — and “Four Black American Dances” received its debut by the Boston Symphony in early 2023.

The compositions bookending the evening are rich with deeper meaning. In “brea(d)th,” the composer and lyricist have included a charge to listeners: Begin the hard work that goes hand in hand with true societal change.

“It really is a response to what happened, but also we wanted to ask the audience ... what is my duty to create a better world?” Simon said.



force, and the phrase is now full: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Bamuthi Joseph enters, reminding the audience that “the United States of America is racially healing in public.” In those opening measures, Simon and Bamuthi Joseph have begun the task of rebuilding.

“In a way, it’s giving voice to those who don’t typically voice their opinions,” Simon said. “I feel really privileged to use music as a platform to voice those opinions and to hopefully spawn some change.”

In a nod to his musical upbringing in Atlanta, Simon has selected a range of favorite works from the Morehouse and Spelman glee clubs for the concert. The groups will perform “Betelehemu,” in an arrangement by director Wendell Whalum, Harry Smith’s “Four Negro Spirituals” and Uzee Brown’s arrangement of “We Shall Overcome,” among other songs.

“Having sung at Morehouse, I know what people love,” Simon said. “Having done hundreds of concerts as a student, people light up when they hear ‘Betelehemu.’ All over the country, all over the world, no matter where we are, it’s guaranteed people will love that piece.”

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Credit: Curtis Compton / Curtis.Compton@

Morehouse College Glee Club Curtis Compton / Curtis.Compton@ajc.com

Jennifer Barlament, the symphony’s executive director, sees this Simon showcase as an expansion of the Atlanta School of Composers. Created by former music director Robert Spano nearly two decades ago, the idea behind the school was to associate a group of working composers with the city’s orchestra. But until Alvin Singleton was made a member, none of the composers had strong ties to the city. Barlament hopes this concert, and the orchestra’s commission of artists like Joel Thompson, becomes an expansion of the composers the ASO champions, an evolution of the Atlanta School of Composers where they are “looking for people who had this authentic connection to Atlanta — deep roots, family, community combined with international recognition.”

Whether or not this concert shifts the ASO’s perspective on local talent, Barlament said the evening will go down as a defining concert in the history of the ensemble.

“I think it will be one of those tentpole moments where it really says, not only is this great music and not only are we making it very specific to Atlanta, but it’s our own Carlos Simon



Simon’s influence has grown far and wide in just a few years. Operatic tenor Lawrence Brownlee, who spent many years living and working in Atlanta, is among the international artists now associated with the composer. The singer brought three of Simon’s vocalises to a performance at Emory University last spring.

Brownlee was immediately drawn to Simon’s array of influences and the sheer amount of music in his compositions. He could hear church and gospel music, but also R&B and soul. The accessibility of the compositions, and the fact that they’re just fun to listen to, mean compositions from artists like Simon need to be heard and performed often. Black composers and artists have seen more opportunities to perform since the social justice protests and police violence of recent years; Brownlee thinks that opportunity is not short lived.

“I think it will be hard to ignore the contributions that people are making because the music is good,” he said. “As long as we get the space right now to do it and perform it organically, authentically, powerfully, with conviction — it’ll speak to people’s hearts.”

Simon sees that as his duty at the Kennedy Center. While living in D.C., Simon is busy composing but is also helping create a space for new artistic voices. He wants future composers and artists to see him “using my seat at the table as a tool for agency” and know there’s a path to a career in the arts.

“When I was going through undergrad, I did not see a direct path to a residency somewhere at the Kennedy Center,” he said. “I just had to create my own lane, and in that way, I extend the lane to those who are coming behind me.”

The Minnesota premiere of “brea(d)th” marked an important milestone in community engagement in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder. Simon thinks moving the second performance to the hotbed of the civil rights movement will electrify the piece. The spirit of the city and the experience of the listeners will create new depth to the story.



“Hopefully folks will leave with some sense of duty. The last movement ends in such a way that it feels like we’re pushing those who’ve heard it out into the world,” he said. “It’s like a send off; you’ve heard the piece, you’ve heard the call to action, now go do your work.”

CONCERT PREVIEW

Carlos Simon Curates. With the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. 8 p.m. Feb. 15-16. \$45-\$140. Symphony Hall, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St., Atlanta. 404-733-4800, aso.org

About the Author

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