
R E W R I T I N G
A T L A N T A M U S I C :

THE CLASSICAL JEWELS
of the
BLACK
MECCA

As symphony orchestras rush to integrate diverse voices into the predominantly white classical world, attention is shifting south. Atlanta, celebrated as the Rap Capital and with its strong lineage of Black composers, might be a template for solving the genre's lack of diversity.

Words by JON ROSS



Fourteen-year-old Joel Thompson settled into his plush red seat in Atlanta's Symphony Hall, eager for the downbeat of a composer with whom he already felt a kinship.

Thompson had emigrated from the Bahamas with his family and lived for a brief time in Houston before finding a new hometown in suburban Atlanta. The composer, Alvin Singleton, also was a transplant to Atlanta. Singleton had come to the city in 1985 to serve as the orchestra's composer-in-residence. And though he had lived and worked in the city ever since, this night in 2002 marked the first time the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra had performed his music in more than a decade.

Seeing a Black composer take a bow onstage after the closing notes of "PraiseMaker" helped set Thompson on a path toward a career in composition, which he pursued at Emory University.

And two decades after the influential Singleton concert, Thompson stood on the ASO stage himself as a composer, narrating the Atlanta premiere of his "To Awaken the Sleeper." The words touched on the optimism found in the essays, letters, and speeches of Black intellectual James Baldwin. Instead of sketching out a dire state of affairs, Thompson used the text to focus on building a more equitable future together.

At 14, "seeing examples of people that look like me making music" made it feel possible for Thompson. And 20 years

later, "I saw so many people that looked like me in the audience," he said. "And they're seeing themselves on the stage with Baldwin's words."

Singleton was also an early inspiration for Atlanta native Carlos Simon, composer-in-residence at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Simon, 37, came of age playing music by ear at the Hollywood Road location of the Galilee Way of Cross Church, where his father has served as bishop since 1996. As a young musician studying at Morehouse College and Georgia State University, Simon approached Singleton in the lobby of Symphony Hall one night after a performance.

"I went up to him and said, 'I'm thinking about being a composer. I love your work; thank you for doing what you do.'"

Both Simon, who went on to get his doctorate at the University of Michigan, and Thompson will play a large part in the ASO's 2023-2024 season. Simon is set to curate an entire evening's worth of music in February that will center "brea(d)th," a rumination on George Floyd premiered by the Minnesota Orchestra in May. It also features Simon's "Motherbox Connection," which he has called "a short, fast-moving musical idea that constantly weaves in and

throughout the orchestra." Between these bookends, he's programmed Morehouse titan Uzee Brown Jr.'s arrangement of "We Shall Overcome."

Thompson, who is now 34 and living in Houston once again for a five-year compositional residency with the Houston Grand Opera, will return to Atlanta in the spring to premiere a new symphonic work.

Through the distinct voices of Thompson and Simon – and honorary Atlantans like Brian Raphael Nabors – the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra has begun re-engaging with its past. In a city best known for another musical genre, these young Black classical composers with deep connections to Atlanta are helping create a wellspring of Black music making.

And the classical music world is learning a common refrain: "Atlanta influences everything."

BREAKING GROUND

Orchestras around the country are in a diversity crisis. Their music is too white. This long-standing issue came into the spotlight after the recent killings of Black men by police, the ensuing protests, and the introspection that



(Previous page) Atlanta native Carlos Simon is currently composer-in-residence at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. Photo by Terrance Ragland. (Above) Inspired at a young age after seeing composer Alvin Singleton's "PraiseMaker," Joel Thompson brought his own piece "To Awaken the Sleeper" to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra stage in 2022. Photo courtesy of Houston Grand Opera.

accompanied COVID lockdowns. Symphony orchestras around the country began paying more attention to diversity, programming more works by composers of color. Before 2018, only 4 percent to 5 percent of the total symphony programs across the country featured women or composers of color, according to the Institute for Composer Diversity at the State University of New York at Fredonia. And many of those appearances may have been limited to Black History Month or other special celebrations. Today, around 24 percent of American orchestra programs include more diverse voices.

Black concert music in Atlanta goes back to at least the turn of the 20th century, when Little Rock-born Florence Price, a woman whose music is only now being performed frequently throughout the country, chaired the music department at what is now Clark Atlanta University in 1910.

Price, the first Black woman to have her work performed by a major American symphony orchestra, had been absent from the Atlanta Symphony repertoire before Michelle Cann brought the composer's "Piano Concerto in One Movement" to the ASO in March 2022. Before the concert, Cann noted that growing up she didn't have a lot of music role models that looked like her. "It's

personally so gratifying and inspiring to be part of bringing her music and her story back to life on the stage," she said.

Guest conductor Anthony Parther will lead the ASO in Price's Symphony No. 3 in November and December. (That concert features the return of former ASO musician Andrew Brady, performing a John Williams-penned bassoon concerto.)

Thompson and his cohort are continuing a legacy of Atlanta-centric Black concert music. In Atlanta, those forefathers are most prominently Singleton and composer T.J. Anderson, who in late 1969 joined the ASO to become the first Black composer-in-residence at a major domestic symphony orchestra.

Anderson arrived in Atlanta at the invitation of then-ASO music director Robert Shaw.

"I recall Robert Shaw was looking to promote and premiere music of African American composers," 95-year-old Anderson told me by email.

During his time at the ASO, Anderson debuted two works. In 1970, he conducted a 14-minute chamber work for voice, piano, cello, violin, alto saxophone, trumpet, and trombone — a rather

unique arrangement to hear on the ASO stage. His "Variations on a Theme by M.B. Tolson" challenges the listener with spiky, disjunct melodies. He also wrote the hourlong, seven-part orchestral tone poem "Intervals."

When his residency ended in 1971, Anderson took a visiting professorship at Morehouse College. The move brought him momentary renown and cemented his importance as a music archaeologist.

To close out the weeklong 1972 Afro-American Music Festival at Morehouse, Anderson premiered his full orchestration of a long lost opera by pianist Scott Joplin, the so-called king of ragtime. "Treetonisha" is a story, most plainly, about the importance of education and was written at the turn of the 20th century. Despite herculean efforts, Joplin never mounted more than a concert reading from a piano score. Conducted by Shaw with an all-Black cast supported by an ensemble of ASO musicians and a choir of college students, community members, and schoolchildren, the premiere also featured choreography by Katherine Dunham, known as "the matriarch and queen mother of Black dance."

"Treetonisha" can sound anachronistic these days. The overture opens with a

"It's really important for us to add our voices so 100 years from now people will talk about these contributions like they're talking about Mozart, like they're talking about Puccini, like they're talking about Wagner." — Lawrence Brownlee

top-of-the-beat horn pulse, anchoring a singsong pastoral melody from the high strings. It begins steeped in a ragtime feel but begins to break out of the genre as it grows in complexity and character. NPR recorded one of the concerts, devoting three hours to the broadcast of the music and interviews with participants.

Shaw called the piece "elusively original," with an "enormous sense of purity and folkloric delight." The conductor knew very little about the work before Anderson pitched him on premiering the orchestration, which he had been working on for years before coming to Atlanta. The evening did as much for Atlanta's legacy as it did for cementing Lopin's status as a "serious" composer.

"What began as an opera ended as a 'soul' evening," Spelman professor Melvin Drimmer reflected a year later in "Phylon," a publication of Clark Atlanta University founded by W.E.B. Du Bois. "The opera tells us something about the dynamics of Black life 60 years ago, and the all-Black production tells us something equally important about the dynamics of Black life today."

Dwight Andrews, professor of music theory and African American music at Emory University, has known both Anderson and Singleton for decades.

"T.J. is an icon in the world of African American arts and letters," said Andrews, who was the director of the National Black Arts Festival when he selected Anderson to head the list of major compositional voices for its annual showcase in 1989. "He really is a kind of Black intellectual. He has modeled for many of us the way in which we should not get stuck in a stylistic box."

Anderson's compositions haven't been performed by the ASO much in recent years, even as Singleton's works have become more common on the ASO stage. Like Anderson, Singleton was wooed by Shaw. Singleton was gearing up for another Christmas in Vienna in 1984 when he received a message: Shaw wanted him to become the ensemble's composer-in-residence. Singleton met with Shaw and knew immediately he was going to Atlanta. He spent the next three years with Shaw, moving on in 1988 to Spelman College as the school's resident composer

until 1991. A decade later, newly minted ASO music director Robert Spano brought Singleton back into the ASO fold, naming him a member of his "Atlanta School of Composers," a cohort of musicians that maintain a deep connection with the orchestra. Singleton stood as the only Atlanta resident.

Singleton, who will turn 83 this winter, said it's rare these days for him to give early performances of works in Atlanta. The ASO last commissioned the composer in 2012, resulting in the choral work "Different River." In mid-December last year, Singleton and his wife sat in the first few rows of folding chairs at the eyedrum art and music gallery in downtown Atlanta, where musicians Jan Berry Baker and Stuart Gerber of the ensemble Bent Frequency performed Singleton's new duet for saxophone and vibraphone. The piece, "Every Next Day," began with sustained vibraphone tones, the soprano saxophone skipping through the tone world, until the two progressed toward a dizzying dialogue of notes, first taking exclamatory turns before talking over one another and finally singing in unison.

Pressed to explain the meaning behind the piece, Singleton told the eyedrum audience: "I hear it and then I put it down, and then everybody else writes about the piece, whether they like it or not."

The composer has a monolithic importance in Atlanta concert music and, specifically, the Atlanta contingent of Black classical composers. While his voice is important to the evolving history of Black classical music, Singleton prefers to focus on the chief goal of any composer.

"I think the important thing is the quality of the music, not the color of the person who's written it," he said. "When orchestras look to program composers of color, they should look at the music first, not the color of the composer. That's the important thing: Is the music good or not?"

As with Anderson, Singleton's influence extends beyond his music.

"In the world of composers, he's one of the great citizens," said former ASO music director Spano. "Alvin's always involved in things that promote new music and help younger composers."

THE FUTURE

Carlos Simon's musical path started at his father's church, but his understanding of the power he could wield as a musician and composer emerged at Morehouse College. There he also learned how to bring gospel sounds to traditionally classical music and create music with a message.

"Specifically, at Morehouse, hearing how you can use what you do to be socially active, to be political," he said. "There are some artists who say, 'I don't want to be political in my music,' and that's fine. But recognize that is a political choice. Being neutral is one for the others. You can't be neutral, I don't feel."

He continued growing as a composer at Georgia State University. During his studies, he performed in clubs and on Sundays at Antioch Baptist Church under Pastor Cameron Alexander, who had deep connections with the city's Civil Rights leaders. The pastor exposed him to Civil Rights leaders Andrew Young, C.T. Vivian, and John Lewis.

The church had always been a constant presence. While his father's congregation moved in 2017 to College Park, Simon remembers being at the old location — part of his daily routine. If he wasn't at Brookview Elementary, you could probably find him around the building. Back then, a young Simon saw people stumbling off the street bleeding from being in fights or wandering through the doors drunk. His father was a steady presence, but it was still a rough place to grow up.

"It was the hood," he said. "It was very dangerous."

With time comes change, but Atlanta's stance as a city of Black excellence has stayed strong. This extends to its music, and it's the reason so much concert music excellence is concentrated here: Simon's home is D.C., and he draws similarities between the two metros, but Atlanta still has the edge.

"There's no other place in the country like it," he said. "Atlanta is a special place when it comes to Black culture."

Brian Raphael Nabors is yet another young composer steeped in church music. Born and raised in Birmingham as the son of a pastor and a church organist, he was exposed as a very young child to the sounds of worship.

He'd started tinkering with the piano by age 5 but only came to formal lessons as a teenager. The writing started soon after, with Nabors writing in myriad styles in both choral and orchestral realms. He fused together the music he was hearing, from jazz and R&B to gospel, into these first scores.

Nabors has seen his career blossom after winning the 2019 Rapido! National Composition Contest hosted by the Atlanta Chamber Players and the Antinori Foundation. His prize included a commission by the ASO under the direction of Spano; the conductor has since taken that commission, "Onward," to orchestras around the country. As music director of the Fort Worth Symphony, Spano commissioned Nabors' "Of Earth and Sky: Tales From the Motherland," which premiered in April 2023. The Atlanta Chamber Players premiered a new piano quintet by the composer in May.

"Atlanta has become almost like a second home classically for me," Nabors said, adding that after winning the Rapido! competition, he and Spano developed a good working relationship. "You really want people championing your music that really care about what you're doing and really know your voice well."

Spano, he said, understands his music on such a deep level that "at rehearsals, I don't hardly have to say anything anymore." Nabors is still busy writing, but his compositional work now competes with his new job: assistant professor of composition at Louisiana State University.

"It all floods back to Atlanta," Nabors said. "It's crazy how everything has just sort of branched off like that."

DIVERSITY IN PRACTICE

The shift toward more diversity in programming is important to Atlanta's orchestra. Spano helped cultivate the ASO's diversity groundwork, and it will be up to the new artistic leadership, including music director Nathalie Stutzmann, to continue on that path. ASO Executive Director Jennifer Barlament points to music moments during the past 50 years that have showcased the city's connection to a history of Black composition. Starting with the premiere of "Troomonisha" and going all the way to Thompson's "To



Brian Raphael Nabors was born and raised in Birmingham and is now assistant professor of composition at Louisiana State University, with a career that's taken him across the country. But Atlanta, he says, "has become almost like a second home classically for me." Photos courtesy of Brian Raphael Nabors.

Awaken the Sleeper," these are events, she said, that celebrate Atlantans.

Barlament said the ASO had been working to create more diversity in its programming before the racial justice movement of the past few years, but she recognizes that the police killings of Black citizens, and the countrywide demonstrations for social justice that followed, was an inflection point in the ongoing dialogue for classical music to speak to a wider variety of voices. The composers who have a special tie to the city bring an added depth to the ASO's programming.

"It's not only moving social commentary and talking about issues that really matter to Atlantans, they're also from here," she said. "It's great to have all this homegrown talent receiving such respect all around the country."

Thompson is also attracting attention, and commissions, outside the orchestral realm.

Some of his newest work comes courtesy of operatic tenor Lawrence Brownlee, who has been a bel canto singer since his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 2007. The singer is bringing Thompson's vocal writing to a broader audience through texts from Harlem Renaissance writers. At an Emory University recital in March, he said Thompson, who wrote three pieces based on the poetry of Langston Hughes and others, stands out

among the young composers he works with because the self-effacing musician is "always the smartest guy in the room." Brownlee explained that Thompson has really spent time thinking deeply about music making and is able to convey "what he is doing and why he is doing it" thoughtfully and eloquently.

Brownlee also asked Simon to write for his recital series, but the composer had no room in his schedule. To get Simon's voice into his recitals, Brownlee broke up music by other composers with three of Simon's short vocal works. Through the tunes, Brownlee got to know Simon's work, impressed mainly with the way he weaves various, and sometimes widely varied, influences into a melody line.

"He has a way of bringing out all of his influences in a way that is in his own voice," Brownlee said. "The same thing is true with Joel [Thompson]."

Brownlee and pianist Kevin J. Miller released *Rising*, an album of the songs in June, stacking Thompson's work next to new compositions from Jasmine Barnes, Shawn E. Okpebholo, Damien Sneed, and Brandon Spencer.

"It's really important for us to add our voices," he said, "so 100 years from now people will talk about these contributions like they're talking about Mozart, like they're talking about Puccini, like they're talking about Wagner."

