

Notes by Nick Jones, adapted from those for the first ASO performances,  
May 2002, with the ASO Chorus, Robert Spano conducting

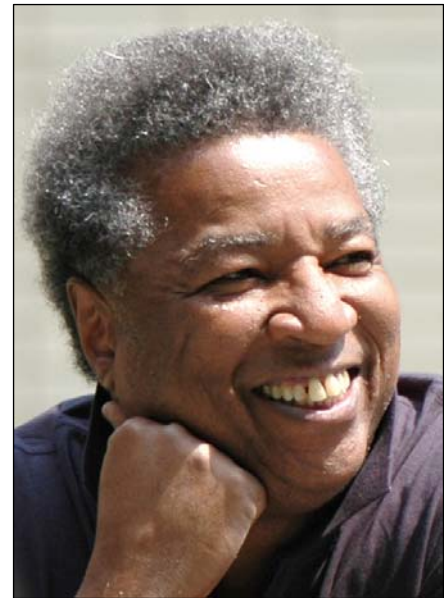
## PraiseMaker

ALVIN SINGLETON (born 1940)

*Completed: April 6, 1998. First performance: May 22, 1998, Music Hall, Cincinnati, Ohio; Cincinnati May Festival Chorus and Orchestra, James Conlon conducting. Performing forces: four-part mixed chorus; two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion (pitched mallet instruments only), harp, and strings.*

“Music compositions do not exist as just notes on a page; the real music is what one hears – the performance. . . . I’m aware that whatever I give a performer on paper, he or she can do much more. I’m interested in their input. I want them to add some spice and/or energy of their own to my piece.”

– Alvin Singleton



Alvin Singleton’s name and music are familiar to concert-goers in Atlanta. At the invitation of Robert Shaw, he served as the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra’s composer in residence for three years, 1985-88. During that time the orchestra played a number of his works and made an all-Singleton compact disk for Elektra/Nonesuch, with works conducted by Shaw and Louis Lane. Mr. Singleton has since served as composer in residence for Spelman College and the Detroit Symphony. Among the many local artists and ensembles who have performed his music are former mayor Andrew Young (who was narrator of his *Umoja – Each One of Us Counts* during the Olympic Arts Festival in 1996), percussionist Peggy Benkeser (who premiered his *Argoru VIII* for snare drum solo at Emory University), the contemporary-music ensemble Thamyris (which produced an all-Singleton CD), the Spelman College Glee Club, the Morehouse College Glee Club, the National Black Arts Festival, and the Ridgeview Middle School Band (for which he composed a work called *Ridgeview Centrum*).

Born in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn, Mr. Singleton grew up around jazz musicians and took to classical music just as readily. Among his teachers were the jazz/classical composers Mel Powell and Hall Overton. As a Fulbright Scholar he studied with Gofredo Petrassi at the Academy of St. Cecilia in Rome and then lived and worked for twelve years in Graz, Austria, where he was very much a part of the contemporary-music scene. Robert Shaw’s invitation to work with the ASO galvanized his return to the USA in 1985. He has resided in Atlanta ever since. Besides devoting himself full-time to composing, he has been Visiting Professor of Composition at his alma mater, Yale University, and he served on the search committee that selected Robert Spano and Donald Runnicles to lead the Atlanta Symphony into a new era.

Mr. Singleton’s honors include the Kranischsteiner Musikpreis from the City of Darmstadt in Germany, the Musikprotokoll Kompositionpreis (twice) from Austrian Radio, the Mayor’s Fellowship in the Arts award of the City of Atlanta, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

His works range from solo-instrument compositions to pieces for large orchestra, and even an opera. Singleton premieres have been given by the Cleveland Orchestra, Houston Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, London Sinfonietta, Kronos Quartet, pianists Ursula Oppens and Anthony Davis, the Cabrillo and Bang on a Can festivals, and others. In 2002 Tzadik Records released an all-Singleton CD of his chamber works, entitled *Somehow We Can*. His *Say You Have This Ball of Meaning*,

for baritone singer, harp, percussion, and string orchestra, was premiered the same year at an all-Singleton concert in New York City's Merkin Hall.

*PraiseMaker* was commissioned by the Cincinnati May Festival in celebration of its 125th anniversary. Because choral music has always been an important part of this festival, the composer decided to write for chorus and orchestra (without soloists) and requested an original text from Susan Kouguell, with whom he previously collaborated on *The World Is Here with Me* for Spelman College. The two met when both were fellows at the MacDowell Colony artists' retreat in New Hampshire. Ms. Kouguell is a screenwriter, script doctor, film maker, and teacher whose book *The Savvy Screenwriter* was published in 2000. She explains, "The objective for the text of *PraiseMaker* was to write a piece that was universal, secular, and celebratory. Most universal in celebrating an event is memory." It's important for our communal memory, she says, "to rejoice in accomplishments, to learn from our mistakes, to listen to those around us who have wisdom, and to learn from these words."

*PraiseMaker* is a single-movement piece lasting about 20 minutes. Though written years before the horrific events of September 11th, 2001, the work seems eerily relevant to our national determination not to forget the victims. Beginning with long, swelling notes from the strings, it has a sense of yearning, of reaching out for something, the music at times interrupted by insistently pulsing figures from the brass and woodwind instruments. Bells, vibraphone, and crotales (small pitched cymbals) add scintillant accents at irregular points, and indeed the composer seems to avoid the feel of a regular beat throughout. The choral writing is quiet, measured, and contemplative, seldom rising above medium-soft until the very end. The final words swell to full volume as the chorus is succeeded by crescendoing brass, which is suddenly cut off to reveal a soft, distant-sounding chord from strings with bassoons and horns, fading away like a last persistent memory.

– Nick Jones, ©2009

To begin again and again  
beginning with slow resisting  
with wisdom  
of past and present souls  
whispering words  
of grace and inheritance  
how it was  
when it was  
in a world  
in our world  
where forgiveness  
is often an impossibility

who we were  
when we were  
who we are to be

counting minutes  
and living the next  
hindsight remembered  
of living and loving  
and dreaming and believing

alive the time  
in the murmur  
of these whispers

we who swirl and sing with each dawn  
hear the souls calling out  
their loving and living  
and believing and dreaming  
how it was  
when it was  
who we were  
when we were  
who we are to be