

ALVIN SINGLETON

FOUR STRING QUARTETS

MOMENTA QUARTET





(l-r) Stephanie Griffin, Alex Shiozaki, Alvin Singleton, Michael Haas, Emilie-Anne Gendron.
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REFLECTIONS ON ALVIN SINGLETON AND HIS FOUR STRING QUARTETS

BY CARMAN MOORE

Alvin Singleton's approach to music-making has all along been involved in an interplay with listeners and their psychology. While this does not mean he has been centered on simply pleasing his audiences, his work seems to constantly draw his audience into confronting challenges of listening, and they tend to end up pleased. Therefore, with so many of his pieces, they might be extremely complex and masterfully crafted, but seldom do you feel he presents the listener with something they cannot understand on at least a basic level. When asked recently about why ordinary listeners seem to “get” his music, he answered: “Perhaps because it’s structurally filled with surprises, a lot of silences, and spaces in my compositions. Orchestral colors are another favorite...”

Contrasts both big and small, long and short, vigorous and subdued, loud and quiet, are important to his music. Maybe a passage is presented that happens loudly over and over again followed by sudden silence. Suddenly the listener notices how loud that silence seems. In a way, it is the relationship with the listener that he regards as making serious music a serious matter. It is the deepening of this relationship that I find especially intriguing about Alvin Singleton the composer. And his pieces are more than what is normally thought of as just pieces of music.

One finds them that, yes, but as much as anything, they are experiences—almost “theatrical” experiences you can hear.

Of course, being born and raised Black in Brooklyn in a basically White world has made his compositional journey a thing specific. Part of that journey was also spent as an expatriate, first as a composition student of Goffredo Petrassi in Italy via a Fulbright Grant, and then for fourteen years composing professionally for himself in Austria (Graz and Vienna). His introduction to the idea of composing classical music was as a youthful usher at Lincoln Center during Leonard Bernstein’s directorship, upon hearing (and loving) Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony. Having heard mainly jazz in Brooklyn as his first listening experience has surely given him an appreciation for improvisation, and improvisation has given his creativity that special African-American attitude both of make-do and of derring-do. Singleton reports having organized a jazz combo as a young man, but hearing such masters as Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, and others in New York, he decided he didn’t have the goods to make it in that field. Tellingly, at least three of his early composition teachers—Hall Overton, Gunther Schuller, and Mel Powell—both exemplified in their own jazz and classical work and advocated to Alvin, the idea that jazz and classical composing were anything but mutually exclusive. In 20th/21st-century America, this is clearly a calling heard by many musicians. There is room in the open mind for both, even though the resultant creation might not sound obviously like some version of jazz. Knowledge of jazz can clearly guide the composer to work with classical music in brand-new ways and

vice versa. And as for improvisation itself, in 1970 Singleton wrote *Mestizo II*, a work requiring the entire orchestra to improvise. And, in 1981, for the Lenox Arts Center he composed *Necessity Is A Mother* for three improvising, speaking, and chanting actresses and improvising string bass. And yet it would be hard to find a listener, even a critic, who could hear most of his work and identify it as jazz-like or “Black sounding.” His contributions are more unusual and personal than that, though the influence is there.

In a way Singleton seems to approach a new piece like a playwright or librettist, in that his musical materials (many of which he creates whole cloth) are treated like characters that throughout the piece behave in their own specific ways, often repeating and repeating unchanged, although they might also grow, as theatrical characters do, over the course of the piece. But you would seldom mistake what the cello, viola, or violin parts would do (or be). And when these characters occasionally interact, they tend to create totally new characters with new characteristics. They may pop up almost anywhere and impose their will upon that moment. They may act in contrast to one another, demonstrating how specifically different they are. Maybe they are suddenly slow and pianissimo after a speedy and loud stretch. Occasionally, as in his recent symphonic masterwork, *Different River*, they might seem to totally ignore each other. But Singleton makes wonderful musical sense even out of the flow of musical moments as different as these. From his admiration for the work of Witold Lutoslawski, Singleton has taken the values of both

improvisation and repetition and how to make them work. When he calls for a phrase or element to be repeated and repeated, he finds ways to make things either sound different each time or sound like one massive separate thing.

That such a major quartet as Momenta should undertake a recording of Singleton's four string quartets comes as no surprise. Singleton's attraction to and gift for writing for stringed instruments is very special. In 1967, as a student in a counterpoint class at the New York College of Music (subsequently taken over by NYU), he composed what on this recording is String Quartet No. 1, his first venture into that instrumentation and form. Its original name for that piece was "Passacaglia and Fugue." Later, in his exploration of strings, he found himself the owner of a string bass almost by chance. A friend's friend needed to divest himself of a string bass and made Alvin an offer so affordable he could hardly refuse it. He could also hardly play it. He says that although he carried the big instrument with him both to Italy in 1971 as a Fulbright awardee and during the following fourteen years in Austria, he only took a few lessons but mainly to connect him physically with strings. And a lifelong, consummate composer of music for strings he did become.

Singleton's 1972 *Argoru II* for solo cello was the first work by a Black composer performed at the Darmstadt Summer Course. Then, in 1974, his *Be Natural* for three strings won Germany's Kranichstein Musikpreis, the first such for a Black composer. Following these works for strings were 1974's *Argoru IV* for viola and, in 2003, *Ishirini* for 2

violins. The term "ishrini" is Swahili for "twenty," as it was commissioned by Music from Angel Fire for its twentieth anniversary. "Argoru" means "to play" in the Twi language spoken in Ghana. Singleton has been using that term for a series of works for solo instruments (piano, cello, flute, viola, bass clarinet, marimba, vibraphone, and snare drum) over the years. And, now in 2022, he is working on an *Argoru* for violin.

THE FOUR QUARTETS

Alvin Singleton is noted for the unusual titles of his works (e.g., *Almost A Boogie*, *56 Blows*, *After Fallen Crumbs*, *Say You Have This Ball of Meaning*), many of them witty, some of them honoring an idea such as the Black struggle—even though they may not track in the music itself. Perhaps this titling tendency may be traced to the fact that his father was a man of great wit and sense of humor. That imagination seems to have re-appeared in Singleton. One notices that three out of the four recorded quartets have titles: No. 2 is *Secret Desire to Be Black*; No. 3 is *Somehow We Can*; No. 4 is *Hallelujah Anyhow*.

Only Quartet No. 1 has no special title, except in its original manifestation as "Passacaglia and Fugue." This first quartet is closer in theory and general sound to traditional "modern" music than the other three but is itself a detailed (and quite splendid) piece of music. No passacaglia in the original sense, but it is endlessly contrapuntal. Quartet No. 1 is also endlessly passionate and lyrical except for the occasional resort to pizzicato (with spiccato), perhaps for contrast. And it even

seems throughout to extend itself via theme and variations, the thematic material being drawn from the dark and solemn opening cello solo. The other three instruments join in on this solemnity for a while, but suddenly the work skips away allegro via pizzicato. Soon there arises an almost old-fashioned dolce passage. Finally, a long duo section between the second violin and viola introduces the sprawling fugue, quoting some of the opening cello music and displaying some complex rhythmic counterpoint as it is joined by first violin and cello before powering to its close. Brilliantly enough, the closing occurs with the material gradually slowing down into an adagio of gritty harmony. “Modern” music as it may be, Quartet No. 1 does have a Baroque feel to it, sectionalized almost like a Baroque suite of dances. However, unlike traditional quartets which are typically made up of multiple movements, all four of his quartets are single-movement creations.

It was not until 1988, deep into the Civil Rights struggle, that Singleton composed his second quartet, *Secret Desire to Be Black*, a work commissioned for and premiered by the Kronos Quartet. The Singleton habit of drawing the listener in is here already on display in its title. Before the very first note, the listener is scratching his or her head about it and is therefore engaged in the piece. The work opens adagio, with the cello locked into what feels like a shifting, basso continuo-like obbligato line, as the violins rise to excited twittering and the viola adds a constant chuffing. The work adds these motives slightly altered again and again, the first violin part evolving into a little dolce repeated line. These many

repetitions seem to have the effect of a sonic mirage on the listener. Finally, this first two-thirds of the piece draws to a close as the cello rolls on and is at last drawn into the melee which explodes into one gritty chord. Might this be a form of resistance—standing up by standing out? Soon the piece seems to seek resolution from the long stretch of intensity in a more mellow closing.

Somehow We Can was commissioned by the Eastman School’s Anderson Quartet in 1994, in memory of the great African-American concert singer Marian Anderson. The title and its dedication to Marian Anderson make sense together. By turns, the insistence on working single pitches, whether held out long or rhythmically agitato, marks this quartet. Repetition and insistence play major parts musically as the work opens with a long series of fortissimo tremolandi on B \flat . These continue so long that when it stops, the silence itself sounds fortissimo. Sudden, unpredictably placed silence is of course a typical feature of Singleton’s writing, as is unpredictability itself. But in spite of the implied complexity of these factors, most listeners can hear and feel what is going on. Suddenly it is by turns scrubbing strings or quietly harmonically tense. You just can’t predict how loud, how long, explosive, or submissive. But even an average listener will hear and experience the materials. Here the loud tremolandi alternate with quiet legato, notably when suddenly a passage sounding like a Spiritual harmonization inserts itself. Silences of varying lengths also appear in contrast between quiet and feverish sections before it all ends.

The final quartet, *Hallelujah Anyhow* (2019) opens with the massed power of all four instruments making one unmistakable statement in unison and octaves. This quartet was commissioned by Chamber Music America and the Andrew Mellon Foundation to honor the Momenta Quartet's fifteenth anniversary. Tremolandi appear again, but, in contrast, there are also little frog-like bites of duplets one pitch apart from each other that come to dominate much of the piece. Then, from these tremolandi there appear staccato sixteenth notes, sometimes scalar and reminiscent of Near Eastern modes, sometimes running all over the place, sometimes repeated tremolando. Towards the middle, the piece rises to what seems symphonic in scope. Meanwhile, the battle between very loud and very soft ensues. In fact, saying “very loud” and “very soft” understates what is called for. The opening tutti statement of the work is to be played at triple forte, followed by silence and then mezzo-forte and then pianissimo. Later, quintuple forte is required (sic! fffff) several times followed by silence or pianissimo. And then throughout the rest of the quartet the full gamut of dynamics is utilized. The work then ends in a long soft passage at quadruple piano (sic! pppp). So many different contrasts are at work... So often Singleton puts the serious listener at odds with his or her self. What mainly is going on? This piece is about loud/soft. No, it's about slow/fast. No, it's about counterpoint. No, unison and octave legato lines . . . or pizzicato. No . . . then he tricks you and presents all factors at once. What a piece of work are these four quartets!

Observing the 52 years between the first and the most recent of these string quartets, one also notices how uniformly cared-for and

musical has been Singleton's compositional work. It would be hard and quite wrong to judge that his 2019 piece is more sophisticated, adult, or interesting than that first one of 1967. The older one doesn't even seem more youthful. They are both simply different from each other. But in one aspect all remain the same—he invites, perhaps forces, the listener to truly listen.

—Carman Moore

Carman Moore is a composer with performances by the N.Y. Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center among his credits. He served as the first new music critic for New York's renowned Village Voice in the 1960s and '70s. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 2013 and Composers Now Visionary Composer of 2020.

Alvin Singleton was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1940 and completed his studies at New York University and Yale. As a Fulbright Scholar, he studied with Goffredo Petrassi at Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, Italy. After living and working in Europe for fourteen years, Singleton returned to the United States to become Composer-in-Residence with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (1985–88). He subsequently served as UNISYS Composer-in-Residence with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (1996–97) and was the 2002–2003 Composer-in-Residence with the Ritz Chamber Players of Jacksonville, Florida. In addition, he has served as Visiting Professor of Composition at the Yale University School of Music, Composer-In-Residence at the Curtis Institute of Music, and as the Karel Husa Visiting Professor of Composition at Ithaca College. Singleton has worked extensively with major orchestras worldwide and has written significant works for chamber and vocal ensembles, as well as works for

the theater. His set of *Argoru* pieces for solo instruments span a compositional period from 1968–2002 and have been championed by soloists across the world.

Singleton is the recipient of a 2003 Guggenheim Fellowship and was commissioned by The Serge Koussevitzky Music Foundation and American Composers Orchestra for the orchestral work *When Given a Choice*, which was premiered at Carnegie Hall in April 2004. His other awards include the Kranichsteiner Musikpreis by the city of Darmstadt, Germany, twice the Musikprotokoll Kompositionspreis by Austrian Radio, the Mayor's Fellowship in the Arts Award by the city of Atlanta, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2014, Singleton was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Alvin Singleton's music is published exclusively worldwide by Schott Music, New York.

The **Momenta Quartet's** eclectic vision encompasses contemporary music of all aesthetic backgrounds alongside great music from the recent and distant past. The New York City-based quartet (Emilie-Anne Gendron and Alex Shiozaki, violins; Stephanie Griffin, viola; Michael Haas, cello) has premiered more than 200 works and collaborated with more than 250 living composers. Founded in 2004, Momenta has performed at numerous institutions ranging from public and arts schools, universities, and conservatories across the United States, and as far afield as Bolivia, Indonesia, Mexico, Singapore, and the UK. The quartet has held residencies at Temple University, Bates College, and Binghamton University, and received commission grants from the Koussevitzky,

Barlow, and Jerome foundations, and Chamber Music America. Festival credits include Cervantino, MATA, Music from Japan, Ostrava Days, and Red Note; a Yellow Barn residency; and, since 2015, their member-curated Momenta Festival. Ongoing projects include recording the quartets of historic Mexican microtonalist Julián Carrillo; and collaborating with Mexican actor/director Fernando Villa Proal on "The Lost String Quartet," a theatrical string quartet for children with music by Stephanie Griffin. Momenta has recorded for Centaur Records, Furious Artisans, and PARMA, and has been broadcast on WQXR, Q2 Music, Austria's Oe1, and Vermont Public Radio. The quartet's debut album, *Similar Motion*, is available on Albany Records.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Ein Kleines Volkslied. Included on *Against Method*. New Focus Recordings FCR278.

Extension of a Dream. Albany Records TROY 527.

In Our Own House. Included on *Dark Fires, Vol. 2*. Albany Records TROY 384.

PraiseMaker. Included on *The Singing Rooms*. Telarc TEL 32630.

Shadows, After Fallen Crumbs, A Yellow Rose Petal. Elektra Nonesuch 9 79231-2.

Sing to the Sun. Albany Records TROY 902.

Somehow We Can. Tzadik TZ 7075.


Sweet Chariot. Albany Records TROY1501.

Producer: Ryan Streber
Engineers: Ryan Streber, Charles Mueller
Editing and Mixing: Charles Mueller
Recorded in October 2021 at Oktaven Audio, Mount Vernon, NY.
Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC
Front cover photo: Mimadeo
Design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

All works published by Schott Music, New York.

Acknowledgments:

This album was made possible in part through generous grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and The Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University; and supported by New Music USA, made possible by annual program support and/or endowment gifts from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Helen F. Whitaker Fund, The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc., and the Howard Gilman Foundation. The commission of *Hallelujah Anyhow* (String Quartet No. 4) has been made possible by the Chamber Music America Classical Commissioning Program, with generous funding provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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This recording was also made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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MOMENTA QUARTET

EMILIE-ANNE GENDRON
ALEX SHIOZAKI
violinsSTEPHANIE GRIFFIN
violaMICHAEL HAAS
celloALVIN SINGLETON (b. 1940)
FOUR STRING QUARTETSFile Under: Classical/Contemporary/
Singleton, Alvin

1. **String Quartet No. 1** (1967) 12:42
2. *Secret Desire to Be Black* (String Quartet No. 2) (1988) 12:14
3. *Somehow We Can* (String Quartet No. 3) (1994) 16:21
4. *Hallelujah Anyhow* (String Quartet No. 4) (2019) 19:14

TT: 60:32

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