

PRELUDE

JUNE 2024 • MASTERWORKS #9



The Planets June 7 - 9, 2024

Carlos Simon, whose music will be featured at our final Masterworks concert this season, is a multi-faceted composer. His music ranges from film scores to large orchestral works to small ensembles, with diverse influences that include jazz, gospel, pop music and neo-romanticism drawn from the classical canon.ⁱ With new commissions flooding in, Simon is in high demand, more now than ever before, and his works have been premiered by multiple orchestras including New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Opera, Philadelphia Orchestra and Washington National Opera, among many others.ⁱⁱ



Carlos Simon

The year 2023 was a stellar one for composer Carlos Simon. In February of that year, his composition *Four Black American Dances* was premiered by the Boston Symphony. Just two months later, in April of 2023, two of his works were premiered

at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.: *Songs of Separation* and *Don't Let the Pigeon Sing Up Late!* The latter was part of an irreverent operatic collaboration with picture book author Mo Willems. The following month, May of 2023, brought a triple-header: the Detroit Symphony Orchestra gave the first performance of Simon's *Troubled Water*, a trombone concerto; Imani Winds gave the inaugural performance of *Giants*; and the Minnesota Orchestra premiered what may arguably be the most important commission of Simon's career to date, "*brea(d)th*", a piece written to commemorate the murder of George Floyd.ⁱⁱⁱ All that in the span of just four months.

The prior year, 2022, brought Simon a Grammy

nomination in the category of Best Contemporary Classical Composition for his piece *Requiem For The Enslaved*, a nomination that was announced just months after the September 2022 world premiere of Simon's *This Land*, performed by the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center.^{iv} And the best part about all of this? Carlos Simon is just getting started.

Simon, now age 38, was a composer on the rise before the pandemic, but in the past four years, as classical music has come, perhaps embarrassingly late, to see that Black lives and Black artists matter, Simon has risen to even greater and well-deserved prominence.^v

Simon was born in Washington D.C. in 1986. Ten years later, his family, which boasts four generations of preachers, relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, where his father is pastor at Galilee Way of the Cross Church.^{vi} Simon's entire family sang or played music in the church, and Simon began to learn piano at his parents' urging to provide music for the services.^{vii} Black gospel music was the core of his childhood musical experiences, and he soon began composing his own songs of worship, learning to catch the right key as worshippers spontaneously sang.^{viii}

In those early years, he learned music "by ear," a performance-and-listening-based practice. It was not until he attended Morehouse College for his

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undergraduate degree that Simon learned to read music.^{ix} There, he played with, sang in, and wrote music for the Morehouse Glee Club.^x He performed in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and learned that William Grant Still, Margaret Bonds, Florence Price and many other Black musicians had approached composition from similar traditions.^{xi} "It was an encouragement," Simon said. "I could see myself in them, in their music and it gave me an impetus to go forward."^{xii}



Carlos Simon

During his 20s, Simon was a keyboardist and music director for two award-winning singers: R&B vocalist Angie Stone and Broadway Star Jennifer Holliday. Each stint lasted about three years.^{xiii} But instead of pursuing a career as a pianist or arranger, Simon opted for composition. He did his graduate work at Georgia State University and followed that with a doctorate from the University of Michigan.^{xiv} Only then, he said, did he feel confident enough to fuse his inheritance in spirituals and gospel with classical forms and idioms.^{xv}

Simon's works are not mere intellectual exercises, but bring an emotional element that is palpable and compelling. In a recent interview, Simon acknowledged the emotional power of his music:

"If this music is done in the right way, if it's being honest, then it doesn't matter whatever your language, whatever your background, whether you're white, Black, however – it goes straight to you. And that's what I always strive for, honesty, in my music."^{xvi}

Jessie Montgomery, Simon's friend and a well-known fellow composer, offered the following observation about Simon, "He's very committed to carrying a story through his music, carrying narrative and carrying meaning."^{xvii} For Simon, 'carrying meaning'

as a Black American man is a heavy weight, and "is a responsibility he assumes as seriously as the fervor of the preachers from whom he is descended."^{xviii}

Simon's Grammy-nominated composition, *Requiem For The Enslaved*, honors the 272 people who were sold in 1838 to pay off the debts of Georgetown University, where Simon now teaches. The music blended the Latin Mass with spirituals, gospel and jazz to a text, written, spoke and rapped by Marco Pavé,^{xix} in a live premiere that took place in October of 2022 at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

Simon's work *Elegy: A Cry from the Grave* bears his personal dedication to those Black men who were wrongfully murdered, including Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Michael Brown. The stimulus for the composition was the announcement that a selected jury had decided not to indict police officer Darren Wilson, after he fatally shot an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri. The elegy was written in 2015.^{xx} Simon's explanation of the music may be heard here: [Meet the Composers: Carlos Simon - YouTube](#)

His orchestral work, *brea(d)th*, written for choir, orchestra and spoken word, premiered by the Minnesota Orchestra, was written following the death of George Floyd. To compose the work, Simon traveled to Minneapolis to speak with Angela Harrelson, Floyd's aunt. Return trips to Minneapolis included conversations with community members and echoes of those conversations can be heard in the piece.^{xxi} The world premiere was conducted by Jonathan Taylor Rush, a brilliant young conductor (and former HSO intern) who will join the Hartford Symphony Orchestra in the 2024-2025 season as guest conductor in December of 2024 for an all-Tchaikovsky program.



Carlos Simon

Simon wants his music to be a point of hope and action, and not merely a moment of reflection. He has been quoted as saying:

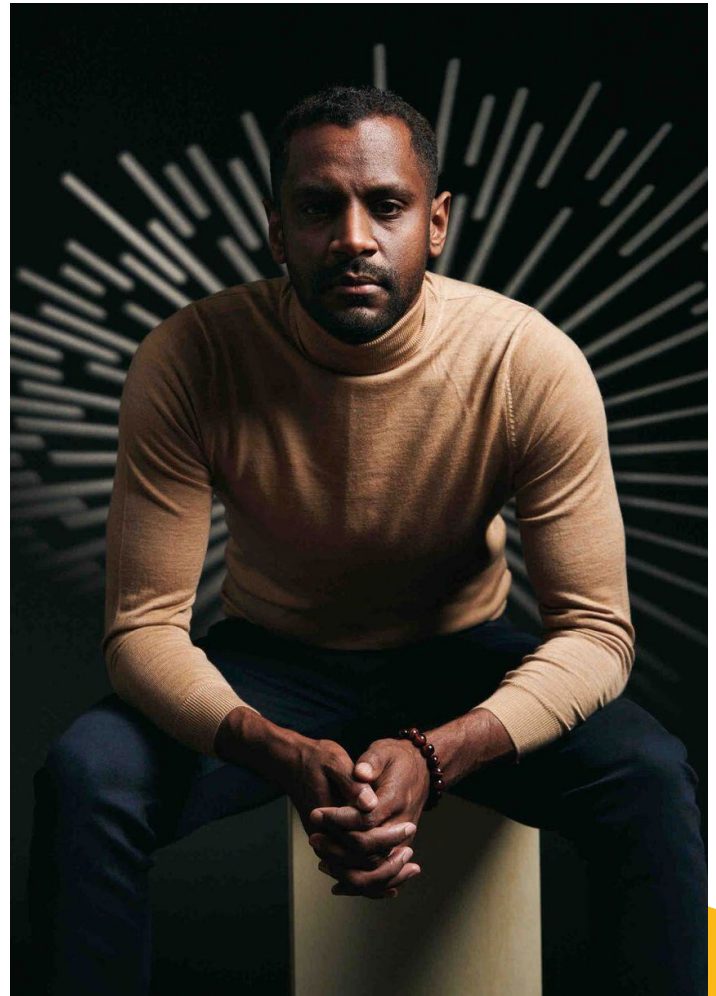
“I don’t think of myself as a politician. I can’t create laws. But I do think I can help influence thought and discussion, which then can cause someone to create a law. So, it’s indirect in that way. But still, it’s better than nothing.”^{xxii}

In the 2023-2024 season, Simon completes his three-year position as Composer-in-Residence with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, a post he began in the 2021-2022 season.^{xxiii} In that role, he became the Kennedy Center’s leading ambassador for new music, participating in the ongoing work of the Kennedy Center in education, social impact, community engagement and major institutional initiatives.^{xxiv} In 2021, he was the recipient of the Sphinx Medal of Excellence from the Sphinx Organization, which nurtures and develops the careers of Black and Latino classical musicians.^{xxv} In 2018, he was named a Sundance/Time Warner Composer Fellow.^{xxvi} Simon also holds the position of inaugural Composer Chair of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the first in that institution’s 143-year history.^{xxvii}

In a family that boasts four generations of preachers, how does his father feel about Simon’s decision to compose? As Simon explained for the ‘Composers and Performers To Watch in 2022’ list published by the *Washington Post*:

“My dad, he always gets on me. He wants me to be a preacher, but I always tell him, ‘Music is my pulpit. That’s where I preach.’”^{xxviii}

We thank you, Carlos Simon. Preach on.



Carlos Simon

JOIN US!

Please join the HSO on June 7-9, 2024, to hear Simon’s stirring *Amen!*, Bruch’s Violin Concerto No. 1, Op 26 performed by soloist Melissa White, HSO’s 23-24 Joyce C. Willis Artist In Residence, and Holst’s *The Planets*.

Did you borrow this *Prelude*? Get your own free copy! Whether you’re a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org. We’ll make sure you receive *Prelude* by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!

Are you interested in learning more about Carlos Simon? Simon's music is evocative, compelling and completely accessible. Please click on the links for some memorable performances that will leave you wanting even more.

Experience the compelling and emotional sounds of Simon's *Elegy: A Cry from the Grave*:

[Carlos Simon's An Elegy: A Cry from the Grave \(youtube.com\)](#)

The National Symphony Orchestra created a wonderful composite of FIVE of Simon's pieces, including *Fate Now Conquers*, *This Land*, *Warmth From Other Suns*, *Portrait of a Queen*, and *Elegy: A Cry From the Grave*:

[The Music of Carlos Simon | National Symphony Orchestra \(youtube.com\)](#)

A deeply moving performance of *brea(d)th* by the Minnesota Orchestra, conducted by Jonathan Taylor Rush, may be heard here:

[Carlos Simon, Marc Bamuthi Joseph & Minnesota Orchestra present brea\(d\)th — In honor of George Floyd - YouTube](#)

Please enjoy *Holy Dance*, the final movement of *Four Black American Dances*, performed by NYO2 with conductor Joseph Young:

[NYO2 Performs Holy Dance from Carlos Simon's "Four Black American Dances" \(youtube.com\)](#)



WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage – and more!

Enjoy a remarkable 2019 performance of *AMEN!* by the Gateways Music Festival. The piece was commissioned by the Reno Philharmonic, Gateways Music Festival and the American Composers Orchestra:

[2019 Gateways Music Festival: Amen! \(Carlos Simon\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

Delight in this performance of Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1 by the brilliant violinist Maxim Vengerov, with the Philharmonique de Radio France:

[Maxim Vengerov plays Bruch Violin Concerto No. 1 \(2021\) \(youtube.com\)](#)

Enjoy *The Planets*, recorded by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony with Hugh Wolff:

[Holst: Die Planeten · hr-Sinfonieorchester · Hugh Wolff - YouTube](#)

CASEY'S CLASSICS

Want the best recordings of the pieces you'll experience on the concert program? Coleman Casey, HSO's dear friend, Director Emeritus and beloved in-house audiophile, offers his recording recommendations of selections featured in our upcoming Masterworks Concert.

Max Bruch's greatest work and one of the greatest of nineteenth century violin concertos, the Violin Concerto No. 1, is sublimely played by Kyung Wha Chung accompanied by Rudolf Kempe and the Royal Philharmonic (DECCA).

Gustav Holst's *The Planets* receives the most colorful and dynamic performance in magnificent sound from Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (DECCA).



REFERENCES

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