

Chamber music program highlights living composers

By Derrick Henry
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

While black classical music composers have produced a rich heritage stretching back more than two centuries, the National Black Arts Festival

will concentrate on contemporary music at a chamber music festival Tuesday night.

The reason is simple: All six composers represented are alive and active, and four of them will be on hand to share their experiences

and talk about their music.

That music encompasses a wide range. There's Olly Wilson's spiritual-based "Sometimes" for tenor and electronic tape, Lettie Beckon Alston's impressionistic settings of Japanese poetry, Anthony Davis's Balinese-inspired "Wayang II (Shadowdance)" and David Baker's "Jazz Suite" for violin and piano. Also on the program is Atlantan Alvin Singleton's "Akwaaba," a 30-minute work that explores improvisation within a classical framework.

Obviously, black composers should not be typecast.

"We wanted to present works that break down barriers, where an interesting combination of elements gives the music real vitality," says pianist Laura Gordy, co-founder of the chamber ensemble Thamyris. That superb group will be joined Tuesday by members of the Atlanta Symphony and noted black artists such as tenor William Brown and drummer Pheeroan akLaff.



Lettie Beckon Alston



David Baker



Alvin Singleton

"I hope my music represents all the music I heard as a child in Georgia, going back to blues, jazz and gospel. That's why it's exciting calling yourself an African-American composer. We can draw from anything we want — and we do, in very subtle ways."

Like Baker, Logan came to classical music from a jazz background. Davis, on the other hand, started his musical education as a child with classical piano.

"I rebelled at age 15," Davis says. "I wanted to find myself as an African-American. So I did an intense study of the whole African-American tradition and developed a focus as a jazz pianist."

As composing grew more important to Davis, he began to extend his framework beyond his jazz ensemble Episteme to orchestra and opera. "It was interesting to me to bring my aesthetic to that realm," he says, "not to surrender to the European ideal but to incorporate improvisation and more interesting rhythmic forms."

At the same time, these composers have sought to reflect their heritage in their music — just as Czech composer Antonín Dvořák advocated during his visit to America at the end of the 19th century — they want to be recognized

and judged on their own merits as part of a universal musical community.

"No one is asking for a special day; that's kind of demeaning," says Logan, who views all-black concerts as mere steppingstones to get the word out about their music. Logan longs for the day when color is not an issue.

"I want to see our music evaluated alongside everything else, played on programs with Beethoven and fellow contemporary composers. Our music should be included because it's of high quality, not because we're black."

PREVIEW

Chamber Music Mini Festival

Thamyris and guests perform works by six black composers. Three concerts Tuesday: First at 6 p.m., followed by panel of composers at 7 p.m., concert at 8 p.m., followed by reception, third at 9:30 p.m., followed by reception. \$10; \$7.50 students and senior citizens. Georgia State University Recital Hall, corner of Gilmer Street and Peachtree Center Avenue. 730-7315.

Showing diversity and individuality is essential, Wendell Logan says.

"We're trying to explore connections and stretch our imaginations about what it means to be an African-American composer," says Emory University's Dwight Andrews, who helped organize the five-hour program and will moderate a panel discussion with the composers.

"We've been musically stereotyped for so long into jazz or spirituals, yet we're a very versatile people," Alston notes. "This festival gives people a chance to view our versatility. I hope the audience will experience my mind and soul and personality in my music rather than focus on an aspect of blackness."

Showing diversity and individuality is essential, says Wendell Logan, whose "Moments" blends atonality with jazz.