



Human



I first fell in love with the work of Meredith Monk while taking a music history class in my freshman year at Oberlin. In an effort to counteract the unfortunate habit of music history textbooks to ignore living female composers, an entire lecture was devoted to Laurie Anderson, Diamanda Galas and Meredith Monk. Each of these discoveries was in its own way revelatory, but it was Meredith's music that embedded itself most deeply into my subconscious. I am still haunted by that initial encounter with her work to this day.

Fifteen years later, as the artistic director of Monday Evening Concerts in Los Angeles, I contacted Meredith's team so that I could present one of her early masterpieces. To my surprise, my request was denied on the grounds that simply acquiring the score and hiring performers (as I would for virtually any other concert) would be insufficient. In order to present the work in question, Meredith's presence as a guiding light would be required.

The multi-disciplinary nature of Meredith's work, as well as the philosophical implications of its transference from her mind

into the bodies of her performers brings an unparalleled depth and complexity to her work. It is music of vision, courage, patience, generosity, discipline, and principled exploration. It is work that has both challenged and rewarded me with growth as a listener, thinker, and curator.

Monk's oeuvre has also had a significant impact on the visual and celluloid arts. She was an influence on the early performative short video output of artist, Bruce Nauman. In 1983, British film director Peter Greenaway made a documentary about her work alongside that of John Cage, Philip Glass, and Robert Ashley. Her music can also be heard in the films of Jean-Luc Godard and The Coen Brothers.

This year, her compositions receive two major presentations in Los Angeles: UCLA presented Cellular Songs in March, and in June, the LA Philharmonic will present her magnum opus: the three-part opera Atlas, directed by Yuval Sharon.

Behavior Meredith Monk



In Conversation with Jonathan Hepfer

JONATHAN HEFFER I learned recently that you keep a pet turtle in New York to help you frame the idea of time differently.

MEREDITH MONK Yes, I have a female three-toed box tortoise named Neutron. I've had her since 1978 and she is still going strong. It is hard to know if she can recognize me after all these years, but she really has a little personality, and it is amazing to be around an animal like that. It is a real antidote to the speed of New York, that's for sure.

JH I'd like to go back to the beginning, if that's all right with you. Can you tell me about your earliest musical training?

MM My mother was a professional singer. She was on the radio every day. So, I was hearing popular music from that period. She was also singing jingles. This would be the 1940s. My grandfather was a classical bass baritone, and I remember him singing. I remember them singing together, and then, I heard that my father's father was a cantor—that's what my aunt said.

So, music and singing particularly, was something that was like breathing to me. It was just part of my DNA, and my earliest training was in Dalcroze Eurhythmics, which was really helpful for me because I've got strabismus, which means my two eyes don't work together. I was not that coordinated, but I was very rhythmically acute and I sang back melodies that I heard from my mother. Before I could talk, I could sing back anything. So, Dalcroze for me was a remarkable integration of my body and my musical ability. I think other kids were learning music through their bodies, but I was learning my body through music. There is something about that relationship that held me in really good stead throughout my life, even though I wasn't aware of how much it had influenced me until I wrote my opera, *Atlas* for Houston Grand Opera.

JH You're almost incomprehensibly multifaceted as an artist. When did you realize that you could dissolve the concept of category as a creator?

MM I think I had glimpses of it when I was at Sarah Lawrence in the voice department. I was doing some piano composition and music composition. I was also in the dance department and theater department. I think as a child I was very interested in all of these things, and in a strange way there was a kind of urgency, which I think a lot of artists have when they are young, to find my artistic identity—to me it was life and death. There was a kind of urgency of integrating as a human being and then that manifested in finding how I could weave together voice, gesture, and visual images. It was a necessity for me, and so I started making pieces that already had the combination and counterpart of the voice, the body, objects and images, and a little bit of film.

JH I read somewhere that through your own explorations of your voice, you've often discovered techniques that you later find exist in other cultures.

MM Yes. Sometimes people ask if I was influenced by music from other cultures, but I never was. I work from



the inside out. But if you work with the voice you are going to come across sounds and ways of producing sound, and you're just going to find all the sounds that we all have in our voices.

For example, I discovered in my own voice a glottal break, and in some of my early pieces I was exploring that sound. And then, I remember my first public music concert was at the Whitney Museum in 1970 and somebody said, "You know, what you're doing, that glottal break, sounds like Balkan music, have you ever heard it?" And I said, "No!" And I'm going, "Oh, that's great!" If the glottal break exists in Balkan music, and it exists in North Carolina Hollering, and it exists in African music—it's a physical discovery that we all have the potential to discover in our voices, but it's what you do with it. I don't go and study other cultures' music. I just keep on working with my own voice.

JH You mentioned that Björk was somebody who interpreted your music in a way that you found very desirable.

MM It was very moving because, particularly, with my solo pieces, people usually just try to imitate and it doesn't really come to life. She found her own way of doing it, but the piece was still "Gotham Lullaby"—In other words, she really found the essence. I think that's pretty extraordinary.

JH Since I myself am in a somewhat bohemian phase of life, I tend to romanticize eras like the one you came up in during the '70s and '80s in New York. There's a sort of electricity and beautiful resourcefulness that comes with that type of lifestyle. Over the years, your concert spaces have changed from lofts and art galleries to Carnegie Hall and center stage at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Has anything about the nature of your work transformed with the change of venues?

MM Well, I don't think the work has changed actually. Truly, I feel like I've always been in dialogue with every space that I'm in. There are some artists, who feel that once they perform at Carnegie, it always has to be in these big places. But I enjoy flexibility. I could perform at Carnegie and then the next thing I do is at P.S. 122, so that a different crowd can come.



I love performing and being composer-in-residence at Carnegie Hall, but I also love doing pieces, for example, *Cellular Songs* in an ice-skating rink in Russia. It was not on the ice, but it was in a sports place with the audience on three sides. Something about that was so important—part of growing older is resilience—you start getting impulses of rigidity—but the resiliency is what keeps you going and allows you to be in the moment

I mean, I just feel that the most important thing is to always be in the state of mind that is called 'beginner's mind,' in the Zen tradition. Beginner's mind is open to everything. Expert's mind is closed to much of everything. What keeps me going is that I am a very curious person and I want to learn throughout my whole life.

JH In June, the LA Philharmonic will be presenting your magnum opus, *Atlas*. For the first time, this work will be directed by someone other than yourself. Namely, the brilliant Yuval Sharon. How did you meet Yuval and what made you feel you could trust him with this responsibility?

JH That's a great question. I met Yuval because of Michael Tilson Thomas who is a good friend. He's always been a champion of my music, and for a long time encouraged me to write an orchestra piece, which I finally did for New World Symphony called *Possible Sky*. Michael also chose the John Cage *Songbooks* for the hundredth anniversary of John's birth.

JH You were close with Cage, right?

MM I knew Merce and John, but I didn't really get to know John until the end of his life when he asked me to sing *Aria* in 1985 and we got to be good friends. The way that they worked was diametrically opposite to the way I work. But I loved John so much, so I said yes to Michael's project. Jessye Norman, Joan La Barbara, and I were the three singers in the piece with San Francisco Symphony, and Michael was also performing on stage. I mean it was wild! Yuval was the director. I've never been directed by anybody else, I direct myself (laughs). Yuval was so supportive and great as a director—especially to us singers.

JH Despite being unconventional when you compare it to the operatic canon, the excerpts that I've seen of earlier productions of *Atlas* seem so natural to me. It reminds me of that old Cage quote: "I don't know why people are scared of new ideas. I'm scared of the old ones!" (laughs) To be honest, the whole standard operatic repertory makes so little sense to me.

MM Me too! I love the form—the form has all the potential in the world because it's multi-sensory, multi-perception. And I have always called my pieces operas—but the opera form where you have to interpret through the text, ugh! There's just something about the experience that is so unsatisfying. Because you have that filter of the text—half the time, if it's not a really good singing actor you don't understand what they are singing, and it is just so static in a way. You know what I mean? Because of the linear





Meredith Monk and Ping Chong in Paris, 1987

narrative, too. For me, it just doesn't live, although the form is potentially amazing.

JH There are all kinds of famous stories about now-iconic artists working jobs outside of their discipline in New York at that time. I'm thinking of Glass driving a taxi and working as a plumber, and Mapplethorpe moving boxes. Did you have any jobs like that?

MM Well, I worked as an artist's model because I felt like I could just have my mind to myself. I tried an office for two months and forget it! I worked for Moses Sawyer, a painter, and also modeled for some sketch classes. I also taught children's dance and music classes in Brooklyn and New Jersey—getting up at five in the morning for a nine o'clock class of children's music. I could manage with that. I did that for years.

JH During that time, were there any mentors who took you under their wing?

MM I think that some of the Fluxus people like Dick Higgins and Philip Corner, Jackson Mac Low—were not so much mentors as older artists who welcomed me with open arms. They were all students of Cage. They really saw me, even though I was from a very different generation than they were.

JH Would you tell me a little bit about your fascination with archaeology? When did that interest come about for you?

MM Well, in the late '70s, I think that maybe I became more aware of it. I have always been interested in layers and layers of history, and how historical cycles come around and around, but fundamental human behavior seems to remain the same.

For example, in 1976 I was working on *Quarry*, which is a piece inspired by World War II and my touring in Europe. My first trip to Europe in 1972 was when I played

at the Nancy International Theater Festival. Nancy is in Alsace - Lorraine, on the border of France and Germany. I wondered why there were not many men around fifty or sixty years old. And people said, "Well, there were two world wars." So, then I started thinking of what it would be like to be occupied. Of course, because of my European Jewish background, I started wondering what it would be like to be taken away, and I just started contemplating. How do you make a piece about World War II? It was a huge piece, and we're now in the process of trying to revive it with a new cast. *Quarry* was also a meditation on fascism, and if you look at the film of *Quarry*, it is shocking how contemporary and dark it is.

My other feature-length film, called *Book of Days* was about AIDS, and also about the Middle Ages, and scapegoating. In an abstract musical kind of way—it's still this idea that we just keep repeating—and yes, the particulars are particular (laughs) but basically the impulse and the archetypal situation keeps coming and spirals back around again. The sadness about it, to me, especially with people your age, is that not too many people know what happened. If you look at 1933, you'll realize that's what's happening right now. It's more just an interest in fundamental human behavior and events of time. The cycles of time. I think, also that there are artists that reflect the time they are in, but there are other artists that are interested more in cycles of time and timelessness and that's more what I'm interested in.

JH One of the first things I noticed about your music was that it somehow simultaneously sounds futuristic and impossibly ancient. I catch hints of Gregorian chant, troubadour song, and organum in early polyphonic music. Where does that come from in your life?

MM I don't know if I can articulate that—it stems from a belief that time is circular, and that you cannot be in the present without the past and the future. You cannot be in the now without having the richness of the past in your being and also the curiosity about the future—that is the richness of the now.

JH All I can say is: thank you for taking this time to talk with me. Any final thoughts?

MM Oh, you're so welcome. And also, I just want to say one thing, because I do feel like a Grandma now but you know, what you're calling a bohemian life; it's really a great life. So, if you want to be secure and be old by the time you're fifty years old, great! But if you live this life that's got that kind of edge and adventure to it, it is such a wondrous life. I would give you encouragement to follow your dream, and don't get scared about it. Just go for it. You'll find a way. You'll find a way. ☺



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