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Keeping it simple

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by Miya Masaoka
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Meredith Monk talks about making "folk music from another planet."

Meredith Monk is a master at combining forms that simultaneously trigger human memory and emotion, endowing the most simple acts, phrases, and gestures with a sense of discovery. She is a pioneer of what are now called "extended vocal techniques" and "interdisciplinary perforniance" and since 1964 has created more than 100 works. Monk has developed her own voice as an instrument. Using glottal breaks, sighs, and vocal sounds, she invents a vocabulary for her own language — at once primal aiid complex. Fourteen members of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus join with the four singers in the Meredith Monk and Vocal Ensemble to present a 20-minute a cappelia excerpt from her opera Atlas, which premiered in Houston in 1991.

Bay Guardian: You entered the New York art scene at the end of the "happenings" of the 1960s. How did you perceive your work in relationship to the prevailing aesthetic and performance practice of the mid '60s?

Meredith Monk: I enjoyed what the visual artists were doing at that time. Because they didn't come from a time-art background, but a visual background, they used the materials in a plastic way. I'm glad that I got to see a little of that work. But what I was doing was very different, and I was very alone. It was 1985 when I first [started] working with my voice in my own way. I come from a classical music background, at Sarah Lawrence and Banff, and I have a background in music composition. I had also been a folksinger, singing at birthday parties with my guitar. So at that time I only had

glimpses of what I wanted to do. When I first came to New York I performed in galleries. Those pieces were more cinematic and gesturally based — I was concerned with how to do live cinema, how to structure things more like a film. The sound was with tape, a complicated collage layering of tape. I missed singing a lot, and sat at the piano doing vocalizations, and one day I just had this revelation, that the voice could be just as flexible as the body. You could have limitless colors, characters, male and female, all ages — a kinetic instrument. I could make my own vocabulary, built on my own voice, the way I had as a choreographer. That was the mid '60s. My work was very intense, caterwauling, almost yelling. I was playing organ and singing. So I really didn't have a precedent, and what I was doing was very different from the prevailing aesthetic, which was more deadpan. People responded pretty strongly right from the beginning with what I was doing vocally. Especially jazz musicians gave me a lot of support.

BG: Did you work with any of the jazz musicians?

MM: No, but Sam Rivers gave me a lot of support and told me to keep going. Colin Wolcott of the group Oregon produced my first record.

BG:
Your work has a certain coherency, a simplicity of a language of images and sounds that you have developed that is very compelling. You can take an everyday phenomenon such as drinking water, or shadows and give an audience a new perception, a fresh view on these experiential bites of everyday life.

MM: In Magic Frequencies, a science fiction opera, we consciously tried to take ordinary things and make them more magical. By putting it in another context, it becomes something extraordinary, cosmic. There was a scene where we were eating corn, and then there's a man and woman sitting at the dinner table. I finally bring in this plate of corn. Behind the scenes there are these three extraterrestrial characters, and they're very curious. They finally enter into the room and try to figure out what to do with the corn. The music and the image counterpoint each other, so that they are not paralleling each other. The experience is richer that way. I also try to balance humor with the other emotions.

BG: Marcel Duchamp once said, "I force myself into self-contradiction to avoid following my taste." In contrast, your work has been characterized by a specific and recognizable aesthetic applied to various media, which is in fact a very different approach, a departure from the Cagean model of the disembodied artist.

MM:
I think that's very true; it's a different sensibility. In the larger works, I am weaving together a lot of different elements, and that requires a "centered" sensibility. But I do think very hard when starting a new work to start totally from zero, taking nothing for granted, not to make the sanic piece that I did before. The world is so business-oriented. People want to know two years in advance what the piece is going to be about the name of the piece, what is the piece going to be, how many people are you going to be working with, what do you want your lighting plot to be. And I don't know yet, so you become a manufacturer. I feel that that is part of being an artist — to tolerate the unknown — and that is what allows the mystery.

BG: You once said, "The more personal a work is, the more universal it becomes." What did you mean?

MM: What I meant by that is that you can tell when someone's work is authentic and when it's not. You can tell something is more pasted on, when concepts get in the way, when they are doing something they think they are supposed to be doing. There is a certain level of truth that transcends and communicates to almost anybody.

BG: Mate soprano Randall Wong (who sings Lonely Spirit in Atlas) spoke of your use of nontraditional sounds and that you develop a reliance on the phonemes rather than text to carry the meaning of a scene — a sort of primal language not based on words. An emotional affect, if you will.

MM: In Atlas, which is nonlinear, the musical lines themselves actually stress what is going on with the characters. So by the musical lines, and the sounds that I choose — the phonemes make a certain timbre, color, or texture — [even] without having text you really know very well what is going on in the scene. The voice is a language; you don't really need English on top of the voice; it speaks directly to our hearts and transcends culture. So that's why we can perform all over the world, and people can respond to the music very directly. We just returned from Taipei. We have a big audience in Taiwan. Without having to deal with English, it really expresses a certain emotion. We separate ourselves — I speak English; you speak Cantonese; you speak Taiwanese. When you take that particular language away, the work expresses a universal human emotion, rather than telling the audience how they are supposed to feel.

BG:

How do you think about gesture? The notion of gesture is expanded and evolved in your work. For instance, you work with 'Musical gestures; instinctual gestures; body gestures; grand, epochal, almost archetypal gestures.

MM: I think gesture is something — that has interested me in different ways. In the early days I worked with vocal gesture. "Sigh Melody" is a piece that evolves from sighs and also uses more kinetic vocal gestures such as jumping, sliding, spiraling. These eventually end up being in the voice. I feel that my movement style has been much more gestural, rather than coming from the Western European tradition of the body extended in space, and a body that stretches beyond itself — balletic, geometric space. I'm more interested in the body as itself. Here the movement is axial and always has a gestural, human scale. I've often played with gesture itself, like how do you do a cannon of people waving with their hands; how do you do a counterpoint of picking something up and putting it down?

BG: How was the score for Atlas developed? Wong reported you giving the singers musical materials, thematic lines, working in layers, motives, musical cells, layered materials. Some was purely melodic line, other parts more collagelike. How has your process of working with singers and musicians changed over the years?

MM: I worked alone on Atlas for three years, on the music, before I workshopped it. I worked for one month with an ensemble that took two years to audition. I heard four hundred singers and chose eighteen. Then I had to choose the music from what i had previously written. In Atlas, everybody has solos and a place to shine, but the ensemble work is intricate. You have to build from scratch a very good ensemble. Then I go back to the piano to change some material, and then another rehearsal period. I wanted everybody to know all the material of the whole opera. I wanted everybody to know where the decisions were coming from. i didn't want a situation where everybody is only interested in caring about what they as individuals have to do. I wanted everybody to care about what everybody had to do. Finally, at the end of November I assigned the parts. I spent the bodget the Housing Opera gave me on the performers rather than on expensive sets.

BG: Regarding your scores, have you developed your own system of notation as well? How much is notated and how much is idiomatic? **MM:** Some of the early works, I used graphic notation. I'm pretty much a nonpaper kind of person. I use it as a memory device, yet I've been struggling with this issue for the past ten years. I've been trying to get some stuff down on paper, particularly for other choruses — the Pacific Mozart Ensemble did a really beautiful job on Atlas. Yet I work more from the oral tradition. Some of my solo pieces are impossible to notate — how do you show how the performer is to deal with the principle of the singing? As a result I decided I would rather not have peoole look at [somethings], and yet [I'd] publish the things that people might have fun performing, and convey that information while I'm still alive.

BG: American contemporary composers have been influenced by, and have studied, music from African, Asian, and Latin cultures. Steve Reich has studied African poly rhythms, Philip Glass has traveled to India twenty-one times, and Terry Riley has also studied South Asian music. How has non-Western music influenced your ideas and aesthetics in music making?

MM: What happened with me is that I started working with my own voice and my own body, my own instruments. As I was working over the years, people wvould say, "Oh, that reminds me of that glottal break in Balkan music," and I would say, "I never really heard Balkan music," and they would play it for me, and I would say, "Oh, that is really, beautiful music." As I went along over the years I started realizing that as you work alone on your own instrument and you are not just doing the Western tradition of the pear-shaped tone - you basically come across different sounds and ways of producing sounds that exist in a lot of different cultures. For me it was more of an affirmation of what I was doing. I feel more like a poet or something. You have to have isolation to be able to find out what your authentic voice is. It's not enough to be able to do all these different things, do tricks and things; it's not enough to be a virtuoso. That might be where you get your material, but as a creator you have to be able to step back. I've seen people who are trying to work in kind of a visceral way, but structurally it is not rigorous enough; it's amorphous. So I think you have to have this one side of the brain, the intuition side, to get the materials, but you have to have the other side of the brain, which has a rigor, a structure, a more architectural mentality. You have to find out what you have to say, what is your voice. You need enough quiet to hear what your voice is.

BG: The term avant-garde is archaic and historical, yet it seems to be used to descirbe your work.

MM: I've always had a hard time with that term and never wanted to have any associations with it whatsoever. For me associations with the avant-garde were in the 1920s, after World War I, when people were really trying to break down what had gone before them. And that had a truth, because the world that they knew had totally disintegrated. They were trying to shock the public and get rid of the bourgeoisie, the middle class, and then, much later, the other time I associate it with is in the 1950s in music, where they were trying to break through tonality in European music. I just feel like these

things I'm doing have always existed in all sources.

BG: In some ways it's like an art-folk music.

MM: People have called my music "folk music from another planet," and someone once said, "folk music from a culture she invented herself."