

PRIMAL SONG

Meredith Monk, at BAM.

BY ALEX ROSS

The family lineage of Meredith Monk—composer, singer, choreographer, filmmaker, theatre director, and maker of uncommon evenings—almost guaranteed that she would do something memorable in the course of her life. One of her great-grandfathers was the cantor of a Moscow synagogue; her maternal grandfather, the operatic bass-baritone Joseph Zellman, fled Tsarist Russia under suspicion of anarchist sympathies and went on to found a conservatory in Harlem; her mother, Audrey Marsh, was a professional pop singer in the golden age of radio, doing a stint as the Muriel cigar girl (“Why don’t you pick me up and smoke me some time?”); and her father, Theodore Monk, ran a lumber business in the Bronx. She inherited a peculiarly American, typically New York story, mixing radical and capitalist urges, culture high and low, the spirit plane and the factory floor.

Monk arrived in Manhattan in 1964, during the heyday of the downtown avant-garde, when Cagean and Warholian provocateurs were laying siege to all the norms of art. Monk’s feat was to bring wholeness, even a kind of epic breadth, to the deconstructive happenings of downtown. On one famous night in 1971, for “Vessel: An Opera Epic,” she bused her performers and her audience to various locations around the city, conjuring the life and death of Joan of Arc. Her intricately planned spectacles awoke buried memories of primordial wailing, Neolithic rituals, Greek bacchanals, inscrutable medieval entertainments, and the folk songs of extinct peoples. More disturbingly, they prophesied the shattered culture of a post-apocalyptic future. Monk’s many-sided art was rooted in her voice—a ruggedly beautiful, piercingly expressive, ever-changeable instrument, which cut to the core of emotion while largely bypassing language. She spoke of the “dancing voice,” of a “voice as flexible as the spine.” In passing moments, she could evoke an

elderly sage, a wide-eyed child, a shaman, or a dying saint. To say that an artist defies categorization is a cliché, throat-clearing for a grant proposal. Monk created a more elemental confusion, to the point that critics in various genres had to negotiate among themselves over coverage of her work. The *Times* once dispatched a committee of music, dance, and theatre writers to assess her.

Last month, Monk presented her latest piece, “Songs of Ascension,” at the Harvey Theatre, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. This time, the report appears in the music pages. Perhaps I’m biased, but music seems to have become Monk’s true home. Since the late seventies, when she convened her own ensemble to perform “Dolmen Music,” a hugely influential study in extended vocal techniques, she has increasingly positioned herself as a composer, relying on music to create contrapuntal effects that she formerly drew from the equal interaction of sound, image, and movement. Back in 1991, the Houston Grand Opera presented her opera “Atlas,” and in 2003 the New World Symphony, under the direction of Michael Tilson Thomas, introduced her first orchestral work, “Possible Sky,” a freewheeling sonic fantasy. Her two most recent recordings for the German label ECM, “Mercy” and “Impermanence,” have instruments dancing actively alongside voices. Perhaps most important, Monk no longer needs to be present for the execution of her music: the singers of M6, a group based in New York, have devoted themselves to learning and reinterpreting the Monk repertory.

If Monk is seeking a place in the classical firmament, classical music has much to learn from her. She conveys a fundamental humanity and humility that is rare in new-music circles. She is a brainy artist but never a cerebral one; she shapes her ideas to the grain of the voice and the contours of the body. For all the dispa-

rate elements that go into her work, she can't really be described as eclectic or interdisciplinary: her acts of fusion are too organic, too logical. She harks back to a time before disciplines existed and categories were set in stone. Richard Taruskin, in his monumental "Oxford History of Western Music," relates Monk to the very origins of the art form, the intermingling of oral and written practices in church music of the late Middle Ages. She represents a kind of reboot of tradition. She may loom ever larger as the new century unfolds, and later generations will envy those who got to see her live.

Monk turns sixty-seven this month. That's young for a composer but old for a singer. Her voice remains incomparable: the dancer-like flexibility, the microscopic control of pitch, and the pure, raw tone are all intact. Still, "Songs of Ascension," which she created with the video artist Ann Hamilton, seems a reflective, elegiac piece, conscious of passing time. Largely missing is the absurdist, almost Monty Pythonesque humor—the prancing about in animal costumes, the exuberant bursts of gibberish, the witty anachronisms—that Monk has unleashed many times in the past. (I love the moment, in the 1981 film "Ellis Island," when a group of late-nineteenth-century-looking immigrants are taught to say "vacuum cleaner.") Relatively little happens onstage in "Ascension": Monk and members of her ensemble saunter about in dark-red garb; form circles and break up; move up and down the aisles of the theatre; and converse musically with the Todd Reynolds String Quartet, the percussionist John Hollenbeck, and the clarinetist Bohdan Hilash (who plays other instruments as well). The production reminded me of Wagner's later definition of opera—once he got the *Gesamtkunstwerk* out of his system—as "deeds of music made visible."

The work begins, as Monk's works often do, with rough-hewn, folkish, almost singsong motifs, which sound as though they had been hollered on some uncharted steppe for a thousand years. The opening section culminates in a flat-toned, brusquely catchy chant of "Hey ya, hey ya, hey ya, hey ya," in a line that moves down the first four notes of the major scale and then repeats the final step. Soon, though, the voices are co-

alescing into thickly layered, warmly dissonant harmonies, not unlike something that you'd find in Ligeti or in the Stockhausen of "Stimmung." Intermittent string episodes combine neatly bustling lines with birdlike cries high in the violin—a precise instrumental echo of Monk's typical interplay with her singers. Rattlings of percussion hint at tribal rit-

the humming boxes. Reynolds, the lead violinist, launches into an extended improvisation in avian style, setting the stage for one last quartet movement and the grand finale.

Monk is an artist temperamentally averse to any kind of bombast, but in the final section, called "Procession," she indulges in a touch of Mahlerian show



In recent Monk compositions, instruments dance actively alongside voices.

ual. Hamilton's video projections return obsessively to a single image of a galloping horse. We appear to be out on the open plain, before the railways came in.

At times, the music gets a little too becalmed, too ethereally attuned. But then a decisive shift occurs. In a movement tentatively entitled "Little Procession," Monk starts to sing brief, questing phrases, in irregular, ever-changing rhythms. The other singers accompany her not with their voices but with the plaintive whine of *shruti* boxes—Indian drone instruments that look like military briefcases and sound like harmoniums or accordions. This rapt, darkly gorgeous music feels like a summons, to which the rest of the ensemble responds: the strings pick up the counterpoint to Monk's phrases, the singers mimic

business: at BAM, several dozen additional singers—including members of the Stonewall Chorale and M6—appeared in the balcony to augment the swelling sound. Motifs from previous episodes are reworked and combined anew: the four-note descent of the "Hey ya" chant is reversed in the bass line and hypnotically repeated. Just when you think Monk is in danger of going over the top, the twilight mood returns. One by one, the principal performers lie down on their backs, still emitting sounds here and there, until silence takes over. ♦

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Hear an excerpt from "Songs of Ascension" on Unquiet Thoughts, Alex Ross's new blog.