

MEREDETH MONK

# Ancient Lullabies

BY KYLE GANN

When I left the New Music America festival December 10 and flew into New York's first deadly cold spell of the year to hear Meredith Monk and Nurit Tilles at Town Hall. They made me glad I did. Attendance at the festival was the highest in six years, but each night the numbers declined. It's not that there wasn't good music (more detail next week), but aside from Naná Vasconcelos and Lou Harrison's Third Symphony, little of the music bothered to do what Meredith Monk does best: communicate. Watch an audience dutifully endure some character's computer-hindered guitar improv; then watch Monk, doing something just as weird, zip her energy into a crowd's psyche with such superconductive efficiency that they leap to their feet and yell when she finishes. You'll suddenly realize what most new music lacks.

Monk opened with a string of solo songs, whimsical streams of humming, glissandi, nonsense syllables, and tongue clicks whose utter simplicity would have embarrassed any composer with pretensions. Her basic formal model, which has changed little since her 1976 *Songs From the Hill*, is one every kindergartner understands: sing a phrase, repeat it, sing a different phrase, work your way back to the first one. With that pattern she drew us into each piece, set us up, and played with our expectations. Get used to a syllable pattern, she'd drop one out and pop it in again where you least expected it. In its way, it was as profound a reduction of music to its essentials as was achieved by any major figure of the previous generation. Cage's and Lucier's paradigm is nature, Oliveros's is breathing, La Monte Young's is the sustained tone, but Monk's is the lullaby (she's recorded three explicitly so titled). If that isn't humankind's most primordial musical image, then why do her songs sound as though they echo across the millennia from a tone-world we subconsciously remember?



JACK MITCHELL

Her songs echo across the millennia.

Nothing she's done has sounded more ancient than her newest work, *Fayum Music*. This was as delicate as its subject matter—ancient Alexandrian portraits painted in pigmented beeswax—and would have benefitted from a more intimate space. Beneath projections of strikingly realistic second-to-fourth-century B.C. faces, Tilles hammered a dulcimer while Monk sang and blew repetitive motifs on an ocarina. Monk's plaintive wail was sometimes static, other times made from haunting modal formulas reminiscent of Hebrew chant. Lay them over Tilles' shimmering bowed-string drone, and they satisfied one's intuitions about how ancient Indo-European music must have sounded far better than the stilted Greek parchment transcriptions one occasionally finds on scholarly records.

The program's more extroverted second half collected seven diverse pieces, including the entire first side of her ECM album *Do You Be*, under the title *Music for Voice and Two Pianos*. Here she had found in Tilles no mere accompanist, but a reflection, matching her folksy voice tone and scintillating finger precision in perfect attunement. Like children's drawings, or the stunningly frank etchings of Jean Dubuffet, these songs evoked emotion through sheer content rather than their manner of depiction. In "Scared Song," the sparkling 16th notes with which Tilles accompanied Monk's chant "Scared, oh I'm scared" dredged up to consciousness the painful helplessness of childhood fears more chillingly than any tone-painting could have done. It worked for adult anxieties, too; in a song about

facile melismas through an aria of articulate stutters: "um, well, uh, yeah... I don't know."

Other songs were of more purely musical significance. Monk paid homage to Henry Cowell in "Anger Dance," imitating his instructions in one work to "play each phrase until you get mad enough to change it." "Double Fiesta" wrapped a cadenza around the word "vacation," chosen only because it fit the piano's rhythm so well. The exuberant arabesques on "Nininini," "Nuhaydenda, Haydenda Ho," and "Hnga-Nga-Nga" proved not exactly that music is fundamentally about sound—many recent composers have told us that much—but that music is humanness projected in sound, a point frequently forgotten by avant-garde apologists.

But rarely forgotten, fortunately or otherwise, by audiences. Music doesn't reach listeners unless it has enough power to jump over its pretensions, and because she has none, Monk's merest ditty scores a bull's-eye. Admittedly, some great modern art has been obscure, so we've started assuming that obscurity is a necessary feature of important art, and

## MUSIC

have forgotten that even Faulkner wished some editor had had the guts to correct his grammar. The pinpoint directness of Monk's art, the fully comprehending laughter of her audience, show that you can still follow unconventional paths and carry a crowd right along with you. That vagueness aids profundity is the great lie of 20th-century art. In Meredith Monk's music, the truth sings like a canary.

I've written before about Kit Fitzgerald's amazing video art, and am perfectly aware that her name isn't Kim. I'm sorry it showed up that way in my column of two weeks ago. ■

## Concerts

New York City Gay Men's Chorus Gary Miller, Music Director

BY ARRANGEMENT WITH HAROLD SHAW

CARNEGIE HALL  
December 27, 28 &  
30 at 8  
Special New Year's