

By Kyle Gann

Beneath the velvet surface of Meredith Monk's personality lies a layer of steel, the self-confidence of an artist who's thought deeply about her work and knows what she's doing. The word *minimalism* brings that steel to the surface. She doesn't like it.

"My impulse is so different from what we think of as minimalism," she's quick to reply in her uncluttered Tribeca loft. "Steve [Reich] and Phil [Glass], coming from conservatory backgrounds, were breaking down a certain kind of emotional convention that had been built up. I come from a folk music tradition. I was a folksinger with a >>>

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guitar. The repetition I think of as being like folk music: you have your chorus and verse. I'm more interested in how the voice digs down into emotional reality. It's like the freedom of a jazz singer, it's not a patterning impulse. The minimalist thing is about reduction. Vocally, I always thought about magnification, expansion. The repetitions are just a layer for the voice to take off from and go somewhere, and also to land on again."

Digging into emotional reality separates Monk's work not only from minimalism but from nearly everything else that passes for contemporary music. It may also be why, though Monk insistently defines herself as a composer, the music world has been slow to embrace her, while the dance, theater, and performance worlds fight to claim her. It was OK for Chopin and Mahler to express their feelings in melody, but when somebody does that today, we say, "Ahhh, she's more of a performance artist." Yet one of Monk's favorite recent experiences was when Michael Tilson Thomas included her work in a San Francisco festival last June, alongside compositions by other visionary musicians: Harry Partch, Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, Terry Riley, even the Grateful Dead.

Monk runs up against classical music's dihard biases. She rarely uses musical notation in rehearsal, preferring to transmit her ideas to singers vocally without the extra visual step; in Indian music or jazz that's standard procedure, but in the Euro-classical world it's still suspect. Also, Monk's musical style has been remarkably consistent. From *Key* (1971) through *Atlas* (1991), those additive vocal processes, chord-progression ostinatos, odd-numbered meters, and evocations of nonwestern singing have been ever-present, freeing critics in other disciplines

from having to detail her musical development. Her paradigm has always been the lullaby, an image so close to home that dancers feel free to claim it—as, indeed, any mother's child could.

What has changed is the theatrical relations between her singers: from the introverted solos of the '70s to the playful give-and-take of her duos with Bobby McFerrin, to the quick-reaction games of her ensemble work, to the interrelated characters of *Atlas*. *The Politics of Quiet*, premiering at BAM this week, presents some of the biggest theatrical changes yet; for one thing, it's the first ensemble piece she's ever written without a part for herself. Second, there's a new emphasis on the individuality of the singers, each of whom contributes his or her own phrases and singing devices.

Yet Monk's music is not disembodied, like the average composer's abstract note-schemes, but social and physical, so that when relations among the singers change, the music changes too. The diversity of singers in *Quiet*, each playing his or her own persona, gives the musical material elements of collage. And without altering her paradigms, Monk has been slowly moving into deeper levels of musical complexity. Dark despite its calm stasis, *Quiet* is full of weird chromatic scales, floating dissonant intervals and false relations that keep it suspended a few feet away from consonance. The music repeats so smoothly, you keep thinking it must be tonal—but it isn't quite.

That's what separates Monk's contemplative music, she theorizes, from New Age: her art acknowledges both dark and light sides of the psyche. "I like to think," she adds, "that my music has muscle as well as softness." It doesn't matter how she's labeled, but I've been lining up behind theater and dance critics for years for chances to review her, so I'm thrilled when she says of *The Politics of Quiet*: "This is really a music-driven piece." ❖

Jowitz

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Although Monk's name clearly belongs in the roster of innovative 20th-century composers, I can't imagine not writing about her. And not simply because she made her debut as a choreographer. Music critics, theater critics, dance critics—we all consider Monk our territory. Music-driven most of her work may be, but she's one of the few contemporary artists making real

And for singers in a Monk opus, the idea of getting music into their bodies may be intensified by the fact that she works from notes and seed ideas, much the way a choreographer does, developing material in rehearsal.

In many of her pieces, the theme of quest seems vital: from the linked "red people" traveling up the ramp of the Guggenheim Museum in the 1969 *Juice*, through her solo journey from old age to youth in *Education of the Girl-child* (1977), to the pilgrimage at the heart of