

review

sound / performance

Meredith Monk
Performance

February 26, Oberlin College, USA

by Patrick Lichty

For over thirty years, experimental vocalist Meredith Monk has been working in forms of "extended vocal technique" (including melodic forms of breath, clicks, and contrapuntal forms) that are still singular, and her *Walking Song* was featured in the movie *The Big Lebowski*. This concert, as part of her semester-long residency at Oberlin, gave the larger public an opportunity to experience works that the students had been exploring for the previous couple of months. Finney Chapel is an excellent acoustic space that has been the site for other musical events and was a fitting setting for Monk's often ethereal vocals.

Placing Meredith Monk's work within a new media context, or many others for that matter, seems difficult. Her vocal experimentation resembles few other artists (except perhaps Diamanda Galas) but has had an incredible influence on all aspects of sonic art, and I would argue that this influence extends into electro-acoustic and new media sound art. In paraphrasing Baudrillard, one could say that, at one point or another, any instance of culture may reach a level of transparency throughout society, and it is my belief that Meredith Monk is one of these instances.

The event consisted of three sections: a selection of acapella pieces; sections with piano; and duets with Monk's vocal partner since 1990, Katie Geissmer. The stage set was as minimal as Ms. Monk's compositions, consisting of merely a microphone or piano. When Monk steps on stage, one is surprised by her diminutive stature and soft-spoken manner, but her reserve fades quickly in her performance.

The segments were arranged in a roughly chronological manner, starting with her earlier nature-inspired pieces (like the fluttering Insect and Insect Ascending) and "breath" songs, and continuing with selections from her Dolmen Songs, and duets with Geissmer, including the aforementioned *Walking Song*. Throughout the selections, Monk briefly discussed her use of glottal sounds and vocalization, breath as compositional structure, and other vocal techniques, all of which create her singular style.

The most memorable moment of the night was when she and Geissmer performed a hocket (what Monk calls a "solo for two voices") with their technique so precise that each of them actually begins each note in anticipation of the other.

What is difficult about reviewing a vocalist like Meredith Monk is that familiarity with her recordings does not prepare anyone for the live experience of her work. With considerable effort, I might be able to give a more critical reading of her performance but just after the intermission I found myself curled up in the pew, eyes closed, in rapt surrender to the sublime. (I would love to hear a collaboration between Monk and Diamanda Galas whom I consider equally sublime but in almost diametric opposition regarding the use of extended vocal techniques.) Hearing Monk in concert at Oberlin, I was rendered almost speechless -- and relatively textless when it comes to this review. To hear Meredith Monk is to hear her, and if given the chance, it is an experience not to be missed. Ever.

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