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## An Evening with Meredith Monk

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I want to thank you for all the support you've given us artists over the years, and for you to know how much we appreciate that support.

This is going to be like a little three-act play. The first is that I'm going to talk, which is what I was asked to do, so I will. Then I thought I would sing one or two things for you, to give you a little idea about the style. And then Ching and I are going to have you sing with us. Or we are going to try.

I wanted to speak of some very personal things about my process as an artist, and my response to September 11th. I wasn't in New York, but my loft is about ten blocks above the World Trade Center. There were some young dancers who were subletting my loft, so of course I was first very worried that they were all right. Having not been there, the distance from the event puts you into a mode of contemplation and throws everything in your life upside-down. For that day, I did a lot of questioning about being an artist in this world, and what relevance does that have in the world? Could I be more helpful in a more direct way?

At the end of that day of thinking and meditating and contemplating, I again came back to the idea that when we do something we really love and we've devoted our lives to, and we share that with other people, that's actually really the most fundamental thing that we can do to make the world better and to make some kind of sense of insight and wisdom in the world. I've been working about thirty-seven years. There are times in my life where, it's a kind of nonverbal thing and not something that I'm that conscious of, but I take something like a vow, and I've done that a few times in my life. It's not that I say, "Now, today I'm taking a vow." It's just, something happens that I know I'm making this commitment and this devotion. That was something that happened after that day as well, with a real sense of surety. That is really indeed what we have to share as artists, and is really important for the world that we live in.

I think that it's an opportunity. It's an opportunity, for one thing, to make a connection. That's very important, to connect. That's something that art can do in a very deep way. Another thing that it can do is to offer a way of listening to each other and affirming our diversity, and really listening deeply to each other and the differences between us. Another thing is to offer beauty and wisdom and insight

to people. Another thing that it can do is to offer a place where people can experience fundamental energies that we don't necessarily have words for. Our mind has what I call "discursive mind," which is the narrator in our mind looking at something or experiencing something, and then talking about it in our minds. The real experience of art is when that part of the mind can relax and can rest, and you're experiencing in a very direct way the very fundamental energies for which we don't have words, that we don't articulate except in the terms of mystery or discovery.

What's kept me going over the years are these moments of discovery and, in a sense, curiosity is what keeps me going. Being able to tolerate hanging out in the unknown, which again I think is really something that's not totally comfortable. Certainly not comfortable. But it's something that keeps you going, because if you knew what you were going to do, there wouldn't be a reason to do the process. That would be more a way of making a product, that we know what's going to happen before it starts.

For me, what gives me satisfaction in the process of making art is throwing myself to the edge of the cliff, not really knowing what it's going to be. As painful as it is, to not know what it's going to be and tolerate that.

In terms of grantmaking, that's been something that's been very challenging for me over the years. I don't know what the title of my piece is going to be in advance. I don't know what my tech crew is going to be. I don't know necessarily how many people are going to be in it. The process of making the work is what makes me be able to find these things out, and that's the beauty of working. That's something to really think about. The value of that sense of mystery and the sense of being able to not make the same shirt over and over again, but each time to start anew. That's what gives us the depth of what we're trying to convey or to share with other people. That's a really important thing.

Another aspect I wanted to tell you about is this idea of collaboration or negotiation in making art. I've just finished a piece called *Mercy* which is a collaboration with a visual artist, Ann Hamilton, who represented the United States in the Venice Biennale two years ago. It's the first time that I've ever collaborated with another artist right from the beginning, conceptually. Usually I do the visual work in my own pieces, but

this was in a sense letting go of some of that to allow for another person's sensibility.

What was very moving about the process was how hard it was for us, what a challenge it was. I write my own work, I write the music, I do the movement layer, I work with a visual layer, I usually do my own video or film, and I weave together these elements into a whole, a world. Each piece is like a world. Ann in her work does exactly the same thing. She has sound, environment, obviously the visual aspect. So, who was exactly going to do what, when the two of us came together?

The original impulse was that we had incredible respect for each other, and a trust that neither of us would embarrass the other person, that we would be able to come out with something that we both felt good about. The challenge was to have both sensibilities be totally whole and have total integrity, and yet we had to figure out where to let go. Where do we actually let the other person have that energy that they need? It's a sense of renunciation on a certain level.

It was a process of two people negotiating and, even though it was very, very difficult at times, we were trying to understand each other's way of working. That was incredibly fascinating, that her process is very different from mine. She reads a lot before she does her work. It's very verbal, her process. Mine is very nonverbal, even though I read a lot all the time. But my way of working is nonverbal. Yet, what Ann is trying to do is a very nonverbal thing.

It was very, very fascinating and, in a sense, kind of like the democratic process. It's sort of like the values of democracy, because we also were able to argue. I think something about democracy is that it also allows for argument. It allows for not agreeing on everything. Then yet, how do you still trust this thing, and how do you still keep on nurturing this thing, that's going to be something that neither of us would have done by ourselves? That's another thing, how do we make something that neither of us would do ourselves?

With *Mercy*, the subtext of the whole piece is in the first image of the piece, where you just see the two of us sitting across from each other at a table. There's a sense that, here are two people that still have been willing to push through all the obstacles and difficulty and come out with a harmonious whole which

really has both of the strengths of us standing side-by-side and affirming both of our strengths.

Actually, the first image is that Ann reaches across, and she has a light. She developed a little tiny video camera that's in my mouth. This was incredibly uncomfortable. So it's in my mouth, and when I open my mouth, you actually can see her. So when I sing, as I open my mouth, on the screen behind us, you literally see the image of Ann. You see mostly the light that she's shining, but you see her face a little bit in there. So you see her, from my mouth's point of view. I think that maybe, in a nutshell, that's what the piece is about.

But in fact, what the piece is about is compassion and mercy, or lack of. We premiered it last July – two months before September 11th – and it was kind of chillingly prescient of what was going to happen.

The piece is a meditation on help and harm, human help and harm. The centerpiece of the structure is these three solos that were based on people who have a sense of personal courage. One of them was a doctor in England in the 1960s who had come from an Oxford education, very upper class, and ended up giving that all up to live in a village of working-class people, and became, in a sense, the priest, the healer, the listener. We had the idea that in medicine now there's not so much listening, you know really listening, to the whole person. Everybody would come to him with any kind of problem that they had. That was the idea of healing, which is, again, something that I believe very strongly that art has the capacity to do: to be a healing influence on the society, on the individual. That was that character.

The second one was based on a woman during the Second World War in southern France, who, along with her husband and the entire village, saved about six thousand young... mostly children, Jewish children, people that were going to be taken away. They hid them in different ways. The thing that was the most moving about it was that it was taken for granted that it was part of human nature. It wasn't, "Oh, we're so courageous and we've done such a big thing." No, that was just *naturellement*. That's "naturally." *Entrez* means, "If you knock on my door, you are welcome." They were at risk of being killed at any time, the entire village. And the Germans, because of this kind of peaceful, really nonviolent kind of behavior of this village – the gentleness – actually,

left them alone. It was one of the miracles during that time.

Somehow the sense of basic goodness was what inspired us so much, so that there is a scene where there are refugees that come from the audience, and they come up on the stage, and Katie Geissinger, who plays this character, is facing them, and she also has another one of these little video cameras on her dress. You see them coming towards her, and then you see their face on the screen. We usually try to work with members from the community where we're performing, so we have people coming from all over the world as the refugees. It was a World War II character, but really we're thinking much more about a basic situation of kindness. So that's the second one.

The third one is played by Ching Gonzalez, as a prisoner based on Parmoedya Ananta Toer, who is an Indonesian writer who's still alive in Jakarta now. He was imprisoned by the Dutch for twelve years, and then by the Sukarno government. He was not allowed to have pencil and paper, and basically wanted to write a tetralogy of novels. He memorized what he wanted to write. None of his writings were allowed to be read. He told the other prisoners each chapter as he wrote it in his mind, and memorized four books, and then when he finally got out of prison, he wrote the books down. Again, just this idea of following vision. That scene was really about lack of mercy and deprivation.

That's a centerpiece of the whole piece. Basically, the piece is about compassion and healing. It had a very strong impact in July. But since then, we've performed it in a few different places such as Ohio and New London, Connecticut. The kind of impact that this piece has had, people are sobbing when they come backstage. The sense that we're getting – which is something that you can only hope for, it's an aspiration, but it's certainly nothing that you have control over as an artist; you just try to do what your vision is to the best of your ability. I'm taken aback at just how much people are so hungry to have a place where their feelings can rest, where their feelings can exist. I think that this provides that.

I've also been singing the *New York Requiem*, which is a piece that I wrote in the early nineties for the tenor Thomas Bogdan. He's very active in the gay community in New York, and at that time was constantly taking people to the hospital, or singing at funerals.

So I wrote that piece for the AIDS epidemic as an inspiration.

I just came back last night from Ireland and singing the *New York Requiem* has a totally different meaning now. It's really a requiem for the city. That has also been the kind of response that people have felt and have given from singing this piece. It's been incredibly deep.

Right now, I feel incredibly privileged to be an artist; that we have a way of expressing some of this un-namable event that has happened, or this un-namable feeling. It also affirmed the idea of live performance or live art that cannot be replaced by the computer, and cannot be replaced by movies particularly. Sometimes movies have that kind of energy, but the live energy, what it has is a kind of figure eight. It goes from the performer back to the audience, back to the performer, and it's this thing that has an open-heartedness that you really don't feel in many other places. It has the vulnerability of a performer, that we can fall down at any time. There are many, many ways that we can be very, very vulnerable. We don't have that often in the world we live in now, that frailty and ephemerality of communication.

That's something that just comes back over and over again, how valuable that is in the world that we're living in. I hope that this will really make it, that all of you can have the courage to go back to your communities and go back to your organizations and realize that we really have a chance now to affirm the power of art. It's something that was really getting lost in the culture at large. It's so important for people of all ages.

I hope this is helpful for you, some of the very specific things that have happened and that I've been working on. I can get a little bit more general about things. But I wanted to be very personal and very specific.

I've been doing a Buddhist practice for many years, and a part of that practice has to do with a shrine, the making of a shrine or an altar. I've been working with the idea of shrine since the early nineties. I did an installation piece called *Volcano Songs* where I made a shrine that has some video elements. It's a kind of environment where I feel like it gets the audience into a very quiet place, and it has resonance of something that they're going to see. It's a preparation of a change of mindset, you could say, or a way of letting go of what has happened in the day and all

the stresses, before they go into the piece. This idea of shrine has been something that I've been thinking about a lot.

In Ireland, I was teaching two days of workshops. Finally, I was able to articulate, "How could I present this as a workshop problem to the people in Ireland?" One of the things that was a catalyst was seeing how, in New York, people are making shrines or altars or memorials in front of firehouses and police stations. The whole city is a big art work now of people just contributing, making offerings.

The thing of making offering, for example, in the Balinese culture, every day you make an offering as a way of giving thanks, being grateful, and acknowledging the larger energies and being very, very present. The aspect of everybody in New York adding to these offerings was something that was very inspiring for me.

In my workshop in Ireland, I had four groups with five or six people in each group, and they had to make some kind of a shrine or altar. It could have been that the whole room was a shrine. It doesn't have to be a shelf or something like that. Just make a sacred space. Make an altar of some kind, or a shrine. Then they had to write a piece of music together that would be the vocal part of it, that either they could teach all of us, or they would do as a presentation. Then they had to make some kind of ritual for this environment and this offering. I told them that it could be to God, or to Buddha, or to a higher power, but it could also be to drinking a cup of coffee in a conscious way, or daily life, or nature. Or it could be a memorial, or it could be a memory, or something like that.

So each of these groups did this, and it was so incredibly moving. One group did a kind of shelf, and then you could see out the window, so you saw the sun. They had brought photographs of their family. They had brought photographs of themselves dancing. There was a visual artist in that group that took pictures of everybody's feet, or their hands, or their faces, and put them all over the floor. So that became the body of the entire class. So the rest of the class came in. They taught us a song. It was completely beautiful. What was so beautiful about that one, each person brought in what they wanted to bring in. Everybody listened to each other, and it was a whole that was bigger than all of them. That was very, very special.

Two of them did pieces that had leaves in them, and had to do with nature. The last one did a piece where they brought us outside, and they had little tiny children's shoes. They would put one pair of shoes on the ground, and then they would pour water around it, and then they would take a step. They kept on going with these little shoes, so it was like a procession of little shoes. Everybody started getting a little teary-eyed, because it had the resonance about the future, and about the future of all of us on the earth. We sang together, and they had something around a tree. It was a complicated structure. But there was something that was so utterly beautiful, and had so much metaphor of what we're all thinking now, and our fears and our hopes.

So there was such a simple kind of problem, but this was something that went back into the community, and would be passed on. What I said to them is that, just by doing that action, it's like in the Tibetan culture, you see those prayer flags, and you see them fluttering in New York, and that's called *lung-ta*, or "wind horse." The prayers that are written on those flags are blowing in the wind. The idea is that the energy of those prayers will go throughout the whole world, just by the wind.

I felt that by doing those shrines in a class they were sending out this incredible energy into the world. It was so real, what they were doing. It transcended any kind of artificiality. What they were doing was sending energy out into the world.

That's what I think that we can do as artists. That's what we want to do as artists. We want to share our hearts and our love, and share it with other human beings, and give them some sense of comfort, some sense of peace, some sense of something to ponder. It doesn't have to be that all art is peaceful. The kind of conflict that some art delineates is very important to our world. It really can be whatever it needs to be, but I think that it has a sense of truth and honesty and it really helps all of us, too, by having some moments of being present. It eliminates the kind of conceptual framework that we all live under, the tyranny of that, and lets us actually just experience in a really present way, our existence and affirmation of our existence.

I think that as grantmakers, the most wonderful gift that you can give to art is to actually trust us as artists, as individual artists. That's something that has, in some ways in the last year, gone in a little bit of a different direction. There has been a lot of trust of

institutions, but I think what's really, really important is to affirm, to trust the work itself. It is what we devote our lives to, the vision and the work itself. There can only be good coming out of that. I urge you to trust your artists and know that we're devoted to what we do. That's important for all of you to know.

So now I'm going to sing a little bit. I've been exploring the voice for many, many years, and that's the center of my work. I believe the voice is an instrument that transcends culture, and that's why I rarely use text in my work, and can perform all over the world and people respond to it pretty directly. It's a very eloquent instrument, and I've been very lucky to be able to work with it all these years, and to be a part of music, and let the voices come through.

I thought I would sing just two little songs to give you an idea of this craziness. The first one is called *Porch*, which is a very early piece of mine, and basically it has a melody which repeats, but with each stanza. I'm working with different kinds of qualities of the voice. You'll hear the way that it keeps on transforming. So I'll do a short version of it.

[sings] [applause]

Thank you. Now I'd like to just do one other short one. It's from a song cycle called *Light Songs*. The last song that I sang was called *Porch*, and it comes from a song cycle called *Song from the Hill*, which I wrote in New Mexico. So all of these songs have a feeling of that landscape. But this cycle is called *Light Songs*, and I think of these pieces as duets for solo voice. So there's always more than one thing going on at the same time. So this song is called "Click Song #1."

[sings] [applause]

Thank you. I'll do one more, which is called *Wa-lie-oh*, and it's also from *Song from the Hill*. And then we're going to teach you something.

[sings]

Thank you.

[applause]

Now we'd like to teach you a canon, and I'll tell you a little bit about the background of this. Then we'll do a question and answer, because I'd love to hear what you're thinking and answer you in any way that

I can, and tell you about a few other things. Some of you have given us a lot of help and I'd like to talk about that a little bit. Let's sing first and talk later.

So, this piece is called *Quarry Weave #2*. You have the melody, the people that read music, but you can throw the paper in the air if you want to. We'll teach it to you, so you don't have to worry about it, about reading music or not reading music. Originally it was part of a piece called *Quarry* that I made in 1976. It was actually the requiem part of *Quarry*, at the end of this piece, which was about World War II. All of us sang this thing, and we walked in these formations. Even the audience sometimes joined us. There were photographs of people from World War II, and it was a kind of a memorial section.

A few years ago, in 1996, the Union Theological Seminary asked me if I would make a service for a conference of the American Guild of Organists. Where do you make performance that's between performance and worship, really? How do we make performances that are like meditative experiences? It's something that I've been working on for the last many, many years. I've been trying to find these different ways of finding forms that fall between the cracks of these two things.

I was delighted that they asked me to do this, and I designed a nonsectarian service that had little texts from different spiritual traditions. There was something from Hildegard von Bingen, who was a medieval Christian abbess. There was an African rain song. There was a crazy wisdom Buddhist, also a woman teacher, very, very wonderful text. There was a section from Rumi. There was something from Martin Buber. There was a Native American young woman's initiation prayer. These texts were woven through choral music of mine, from over the years, and at a certain point, the whole thing kind of split open and we taught this round to the congregation. So that's what we're going to do with you.

So this is what we're going to do. We'll sing it for you first, and then we'll just go over the melody. You don't have to read this. This is just if people are into reading music, then you can keep it as a souvenir. But basically, we'll teach you this, and then we'll see if we can get a four-part canon going here. So, first we're going to sing the melody for you. And we'll do it over and over and over again. You don't have to worry; you don't have to rush. It goes like this.

[sings]

That's it. We're just going to take it one little phrase at a time, and then you can just do that over and over again. Don't even worry if you're tone-deaf or anything; it doesn't matter. It feels really nice to sing together. I'm telling you, it really does. So this is for all of our pleasure, and the pleasure of the room. So we'll start the first phrase. It goes:

[sings]

One of the things that we always say about singing together as an ensemble or group is that, if you only hear yourself, then you're not singing it right. Because the beauty of singing in a group is hearing the other people. That's the really good part of it.

[singing] [applause]

Okay, so now we're in a democracy. We can vote. Would you like to learn another one, or would you like to have a question and answer? You have the choice. Although you're going to get both either way, but what are you ready for right now? Another song? All right.

Okay, this is fun. This is a song that when it gets going, we start to get something like African poly-rhythms, even though the words are not African, but the rhythmic thing is. First of all, you've got to get this pulse going. We'll sing it for you first.

[singing]

Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.

We'll go a little higher.

[singing]

Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.

It sounds really simple, but that third part, do you hear that little syncopated thing? That's a little syncopated thing. So listen again.

Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.

Stand up and just get your feet going. Everybody just get that pulse. That's really important. Now, if we took the chairs away, we could have a dance and everything here on this one. So first let's get the pulse.

[singing]

Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.

Now listen again, "I heard a bird sing, a-dee-da-da sing."

[singing]

Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.  
Cuckoo, as I went walking on a May morning,  
I heard a bird sing.

[Everyone singing]

Okay, do you have any questions?

**Audience:** I have never heard you sing before, and when you started singing, immediately it came to mind the story you told about the man who couldn't write, who didn't have the paper and pen and had to keep everything in his head for years, and then four books came out. It made me curious about your process, because you're not dealing with text language, how are you memorizing? Are you recording your sounds? How are you developing your songs?

**Monk:** In terms of making the songs, or in terms of passing them on?



**Audience:** Making them.

**Monk:** Right now, I'm struggling a lot with this idea of publishing, because I'm actually publishing music with Boosey & Hawkes. But it's weird, because I've been always very anti-paper on a certain level, because I feel that I come more from the oral tradition in music, which is an age-old tradition. Passing it on physically.

That's pretty much how I work. I work very viscerally and I don't think of it so much as memorization. It's in my voice. My voice is part of my body. It's not really like memory, like I'm looking at a page and I'm memorizing from the page. It's just, as I make the piece, it becomes really more part of me, and so it's not that same process.

For example, there's a piece that we do called "Hocket" from *Facing North*. "Hocket" is a form where we make a melody, and each person has one note. We're throwing these notes back and forth. I remember that I made the piece for another person, a duet with Robert Ian, who's a person who worked in my ensemble for many years, and I wanted to make a piece for the two of us. I had written out this melody, and we tried to memorize it by looking at it. We were working at it for months. We'd look at each other, "We are really good singers, aren't we? We can't get this!" Then I realized the body is actually faster than the mind. In fact, to sing that thing, we were going so fast, if we have any thought come into our mind, we lose it. We absolutely fall apart.

So it's kind of the same thing in meditation. You're aware of thought actually being a lot slower. So in some ways, I save one step that way. People don't have to memorize. They learn it from an oral tradition.

**Audience:** Are the songs changing every time? Are your songs changing every time you perform?

**Monk:** The first song, *Porch*, which I've sung since the late sixties, the form would be pretty much the same, but I sing it totally differently. That's the beauty with these forms, they're very rigorous. They're very, very precise. The kind of precision or intricacy of the music – sometimes the music sounds very simple, but it's incredibly intricate. Within that, there's always room to be in the moment, and there's always room to play with the material. So you would absolutely know that the forms are exactly the same,

and yet within that, I always can play. So that's why I can sing them over and over again and there's always more to find in them.

**Audience:** How is the popular acceptance of your work and sales of your recordings?

**Monk:** The thing about my records is that they are kind of timeless in a certain way, and that's another thing I've always been interested in, in my work, is not so much being popular in the sense of one year, and then the next year it's gone, but somehow doing work that, ten years, twenty years, it still holds up. I've always been more interested in the kind of timelessness of art.

*Dolman Music*, which is the first record that I did for ECM in the early '80s, is still selling really well. It's a steady thing. One of the things about being an artist is a lot of endurance. To just keep on going. And then sometimes, "Oh! Meredith Monk! Have you seen her work? It's so great!" And then "Ugh, she's not so interesting." And then, "Oh, she's so great!" and then, "Ugh, she's not interesting," "Oh, she's so great!" "Ugh, she's not so interesting." But I'm just plodding along, just marching along doing my work. It doesn't really make much difference one way or the other, you know.

**Audience:** [inaudible]

**Monk:** This is the thing about the video camera in my mouth, for example. The fact that the video camera was in my mouth is kind of the same isolation that I can do with singing the melody and the clicks, because the melody is coming from back here. The clicks are coming on the top of my mouth. I've explored the voice and the way to produce the voice for many, many years. What happens is that you're able to isolate. It doesn't seem that hard for me, but that's just because I'm very used to isolating the back of my throat, the back of my palate, the soft palate, the hard palate, the lips, and the tongue, and the air and the different ways that the air comes through.

But with the video camera, I can only sing behind my palate and my lips. Otherwise, it gets stuck, like I can't do anything with my palate because this thing is in my mouth. So that's been very interesting to see how to work with that. Then I realize that's pretty much the same that you need to do with the click song.

**Audience:** So, I have a technical question and a follow-up question. The technical question is, do you have perfect pitch?

**Monk:** No, I don't. I have very good relative pitch, but I don't have perfect pitch. Do you have perfect pitch?

**Audience:** No, I wish I did. I want to know how it affected you.

**Monk:** Perfect pitch is a pretty amazing thing. One of the people in our Ensemble, Allison Sniffin, has perfect pitch. But there's also a down side to it.

My mother was a radio singer. She was the original Muriel Cigar on radio, and Shaffer Beer, and Chiquita Banana. So, she was one of these people that could literally take a piece of music and read down anything. Time is money in that field. There was one woman, Lois Winter, who had perfect pitch. If they were in a recording session or on radio where the conductor wanted to transpose down a half-step, this poor woman had to go into the other room and literally write the whole thing out in another key. Everybody else, "Oh, you want it down a half-step? Fine." Everybody adjusts. But she, because she had perfect pitch, she couldn't. She had to literally write the whole score over. So that has a disadvantage.

But I have pretty clear relative pitch. Pretty good relative pitch.

**Audience:** *[inaudible]*

**Monk:** Sure, definitely. This is a wonderful question that I'm very happy to answer. A lot of people hear my music, and they say, "Did you go to Africa? Did you go to Bali? Did you go here, did you go there? Did you take this material and somehow work it into your music?"

I came both from music and dance backgrounds. I'm a fourth-generation singer in my family. That was my first language, to sing. Then I had an eye problem, so my mother took me to Dalcroze Eurhythmics, which is a way of learning music through movement. That's how I started doing some movement, because I was incredibly uncoordinated. So that's how the movement thing started.

One thing about the dance tradition is that there's a tradition of finding a vocabulary for yourself built on your own body, and then making movement from

that. After I graduated from Sarah Lawrence, where I had been both in the voice and the dance departments, I started vocalizing one day, and realized that the voice could be like the spine. It could be flexible. It could have colors within it. It could have textures within it. It could have characters within it. It could have gender. It could have age, landscape. You know, it was like one of those flashes that change your life. From that point on, I decided that I would find my own vocabulary built on my own voice.

As a dancer I'd had a lot of physical limitations, so I had to find a kind of idiosyncratic style for my own body. I could apply that same principle to my voice, but I had a more virtuosic voice to start out with, coming from a singer's family.

I spent years and years just working with my own voice, and pulling out the range, and working with the glottal break, and finding all the things that are within the voice, and within my voice. I realized that, when people would come and hear my things, and they'd say, "You know, that sounds a little bit like Balkan music" or "That one sounds like African music" or "This sounds like this or that." I'd say, you know, I never have really listened to these musics.

Then I realized it was really that, within each of our voices, we have the world. We have the whole world in our voices. As soon as you are not trying to get the pear-shaped tone, but you're trying to find what the physical thing of the voice is, and what is in the human voice, you are definitely going to find these things that transcend culture.

The glottal break is in the North Carolina holler, and it's in yodeling. It's in Balkan music, and it's in African music. Some kind of Chinese opera has that glottal break. You're going to find that sound exists through all these cultures. As a composer, I find that sound and then I make my music from that. Some people will have a little bit of a memory of a culture, another culture.

Maybe I'm completely naïve, but my belief is that music transcends culture, and that we can go all over the world, and it goes right to the heart. It transcends language. In that way, we have traveled all over the world, and we have had a response, very direct response.

For me, non-European cultures, as an overall sort of spiritual inspiration, keep me going. I've tried to explain that only in Western European tradition,

there was the Rationalist and Newton, and all this idea of mind over matter, man over nature, the dualism, you know. "I think, therefore I am," that Cartesian thing. That was a Western European idea of man being more powerful than nature, or human beings being more powerful than nature. That's when everything started splitting off. Singers are over here, dancers are over here, theater is over here, writing is over here. But if you think about African culture, Asian culture, you think about also the accounts of ancient performance forms, all of those things are totally integrated. There's no problem.

One of the problems I've had in my work is that my work has two main branches. One is the music, the work for the voice, and my deep exploration of the voice. The other is these kinds of interdisciplinary or combined kind of forms, which include music of voice, movement, images, sometimes little shards of narrative or theater.

Everybody has such a hard time with me. What category does that person belong in? You've got to decide on one! You just have to! What critic is going to come from the newspaper? They don't know who to send. It's thrown at me as if it's a weakness, but I think it's my strength. That's when I get a lot of courage to say, in Africa, you could have a master drummer, a singer, a dancer, and a storyteller in one person. And in Asia, the more things that are within one body, the higher you are as an artist.

I was talking to a friend of mine who's Balinese, and she said, "The more things that one person does, the better they are." So it's only in the Western European tradition that there's a problem with it. In the world that we're living in now, not only in terms of culture, but also in terms of the complexity of the world, the way that perceptions are coming so quickly, we cannot be literal like that anymore, and we cannot be linear like that anymore. In fact, it's much more appropriate to make forms where all these things are combined and we're reflecting and mirroring the complexity and the liveliness of the culture that we live in rather than having to do A equals B and B equals C, and we have to put everything in these little boxes, and that's it.

I have to say from the bottom of my heart that that has always given me a lot of courage. It really has.

[applause]

Thank you for that.

**Audience:** I'm not quite sure how to ask this question, but I'm just wondering about the seeming contradiction between calling your work coming from an oral tradition, now working with a publisher who's trying to codify this. And also, what is the legacy? What happens to your work when you stop performing your work? Because it's so unique to your exploration of the voice and your body, and all of that?

**Monk:** I'm struggling with that, you know, having a very hard struggle with it. I'm struggling with mortality. [sings] "Dum, da dum dum." It's coming up. It's coming up. I fought for years, and said, "I don't want to do it. Forget it."

One of the things that I've been trying to do at the same time is to feel that I'm a generous person. From the time I did *Atlas*, which is an opera that I did for Houston Grand Opera, I had people from all over the world in the cast. Some of them came from the classical tradition. They were all game to move and to try different things with the voice. They all had careers of their own.

In the really early days, the people in my ensemble started working with me as very young people, and so they knew my vocabulary. They knew my way of thinking about things. But this was a group of people that already had their own careers. Some of them asked me if they could sing my music. Of course since they had worked with me, I could teach it to them directly. But it was more this idea, and not all the results were to my liking, exactly, but it's a thing of trying to let go of control a little bit, that somehow it should be for anybody that wants to have it.

The way I've been working with Boosey & Hawkes is, I've been doing it just piece by piece. Like these solos, I don't think I could ever put on a score. But some of the choral pieces can be scored with a lot of explanation. It's taken a year and a half to do these two little one-minute pieces on paper. Like the Panda Chant, this Panda [sings] "Ba da ba day," this Panda thing. I could teach that in half an hour to a group, but on paper it took about a year and a half to figure out how to do it.

They're really amazing. They've taken the time. What we've done with the Panda Chant was a kind of one-page map of the piece, which would be a lot easier to learn that way. Then we did a transcription

of one performance, so you could actually see it in a linear way. Then I have extensive program notes of how to perform it, and then we have a CD with two different performances of it. One with my group in the studio, so you can hear the vocal thing really close, and one in St. Mark's Church, where you can hear a larger group doing it. Then we have a videotape available for them to practice, because this is a very complicated thing where we're stamping, and we're doing rhythms against the singing. It's a poly-rhythmic kind of thing.

That's so far what I've done with Boosey. They know that I'm very, very skeptical, and they're just taking it one piece at a time. The next thing we'll do with them, which again, could be done in scoring, is my piano pieces, which are actually simpler. I'm just taking it one little step at a time. I know that there are things of my repertoire that will just die with me, for sure, particularly the solo things.

**Audience:** [inaudible]

**Monk:** Yeah. I have the recordings. You know, I have twelve or thirteen recordings. The recording studio is another whole thing. If I hear some of these recordings, I go, "Oh, I could do it a whole lot better than that!" That's the one that's going to be there forever! You're in the studio, and this microphone is looking at you, and you're going, "You've got to do it the best that you ever can," and if you have that in your mind, you never do it well. You're too careful, you're too this, you're too that. Some of the recordings I feel are really good, and that's the way that people can also use that as an aid, you know, to learn the music. So it's something I'm struggling with a lot. It's really a hard struggle.

**Audience:** [inaudible]

**Monk:** With the Ensemble? Usually because of the complexity of a group form, the parameters are a little smaller. Ching is a good person to ask. Some of them are really precise, and have to be, and then there are some things where we can play within it. We've been singing together for so long that we know where the other people are.

That's one other thing I just wanted to say about art in general. I realize as the years have been going on, that the real content of the work is the people, and the kind of radiance of these people. So I can say, I'm making this piece about Atlas, it's about this,

it's about that. But really, what it's about is these amazing human beings. As a template of behavior, the way that it's so generous, the way that people perform and they pull for each other if somebody's having troubles.

To be in my work, you have to let your ego go. Even me, as a person that's making the work, as a performer, I'm just another member of the ensemble. It takes a lot of courage for them. How would you like to be in a rehearsal where the person who's doing the piece doesn't know what the end of the piece is going to be?

They have their commitment to following along this process, which sometimes is really, really hard. My friend Tom Bogdan gave me this big blue hippopotamus when I was making *Atlas*, and I said, "This is what making *Atlas* is like. It's like trying to give birth to this big blue hippopotamus."

They hang in there. They give so much support. So that takes a lot of courage. In the Ensemble everybody shines. It's not the instant gratification you get from a Broadway show or something like that, where you're strutting your stuff. We're all putting ourselves into the larger whole. That's also what's very satisfying, I think. But Ching could tell you more about the Ensemble.

**Audience:** [inaudible]

**Monk:** Well, we've known each other's work for a long time. Of all the people in the visual arts world, I feel the closest to her work. So we started talking about this. She always says that she's been very influenced by my work, that she heard me sing in the early '80s when she was still a student. Something about the directness of the singing, she felt that if she could make visual work that has that kind of directness, that she would have been happy. So she had stated that somewhere that she had been influenced by my work, so I knew that.

We just started talking about what we would want to do. It was very challenging for both of us, because we work in very different ways, and we communicate in very different ways. For instance, if I say "structure," that means something very different to me than it does to her. She thinks of it visually; I think of it in time. I come from a time art; she doesn't. And yet, she's very interested in the performance components. I think it has impacted both of us in a really strong way.

Since we just finished the piece, I can't tell you exactly how. I feel like we're both now taking into ourselves how it has impacted. But we're also even going to try to work on another piece, maybe a little duet piece. *Mercy* has the Ensemble. It has Ching, it has Katie Geissinger, Theo Bleckmann, Lanny Harrison, and Allison Sniffin playing multi instruments, and John Hollenbeck playing multi instruments. So we do have a cast there other than Ann and me. And Ann is also performing in the piece, too, which is very interesting.



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