

Meredith Monk: impermanence

Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble

Theo Bleckmann, Ellen Fisher, Katie Geissinger, Ching Gonzalez, Meredith Monk, Allison Sniffin and Sasha Bogdanowitsch, Silvie Jensen: voices

Allison Sniffin: piano, violin; **John Hollenbeck:** percussion; **Bohdan Hilash:** woodwinds

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Meredith Monk's ninth release on ECM offers the thoroughly revised and condensed musical version of the 90-minute interdisciplinary work "impermanence" which employed vocal and instrumental settings, movement and video and was given its premiere at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco on February 15 and 16, 2006. The two-part piece has toured widely in the US and was welcomed by Stephen Brookes in the Washington Post as "a beautiful and deeply personal work on the themes of death, leave-taking and the fragility of human life". Inspired by private yet universal experiences of loss and ephemerality, Monk wrote music of "voluptuous sparseness" (San Francisco Chronicle) – multi-part settings, both poignant and joyful, in which gentle melodies and Monk's celebrated extended vocal techniques are combined with a new range of instrumental sounds. Far from presenting a mere "soundtrack" of the staged original, the musical version, produced by Manfred Eicher at New York's Avatar Studio, is a 16-part suite with increased structural complexity and considerable alterations of the musical material.

"I rewrote a lot of the music, as I usually do when I work on material which is part of an interdisciplinary composition", says Monk. "I compress the forms, change the order of pieces and enrich the texture, so that sonically you get the same kind of richness you would experience when seeing us on stage. When you work with diverse artistic elements you have to balance them out, whereas on the album it's just listening and all the perception is put into the music." The new musical form doesn't follow the original sequence as the original shape of two contrasting parts is abandoned in favour of a coherent arch-like suite.

"impermanence" marks a new step in Monk's development as a composer. Elegant as ever, her writing displays a new emphasis on chromaticism, clearly audible in pieces such as "liminal". Additionally, Monk's recent work on purely instrumental compositions – for string quartet and large symphony orchestra respectively – has led her to explore not only voices as instruments but also to "think of the instruments as voices", as she points out in her liner notes to the present album. While her extended vocal techniques frequently imply non-verbal settings, here, associative and poetic texts of different origins make repeated appearances. "'impermanence' with its idea of the fleeting nature of life and constant change seemed to need some kind of explicitness that grounded the flow like rocks in a stream", says Monk. Used in the context of elusiveness that pervades the piece as a whole though, these words always tend to dissolve in the vocal/instrumental sound and in the steady but calm musical flow.

The first germ for "impermanence" was laid when Monk started working on a song based on words from the book "The Force of Character: And the Lasting Life" by American psychologist/philosopher and best-selling author James Hillman in autumn 2001. "Hillman's book deals with the rather positive aspects of aging, and it contains a chapter about the idea of

the double meaning of the word 'last'. It's almost a kind of litany around both ironic and poignant words which spoke to me very intensely." In November 2002, Mieke van Hoek, Monk's partner of 22 years, suddenly died – a major shock which triggered fundamental doubts in the significance of art and art-making altogether. A few months later, Monk was approached by Rosetta Life, a London based organization which connects artists with hospice patients. "They asked me to write music for a play about their stories but I expressed that I was more interested in making an interdisciplinary piece about impermanence since at the time that subject was occupying most of my thoughts. After spending time with Rosetta Life workers and patients in London, a deeply moving experience, I began seeing the piece as an abstract, poetic evocation of the passages of life." In her liner notes Monk admits that creating a major work about a concept as abstract and ungraspable as impermanence seemed a quite impossible task to her: "I could only imply it, offer glimpses, create music that would be evocative but would also leave space for each listener to have his or her responses."

As in most of her work, Monk composes especially for her ensemble of long-standing musical partners. "First, I work in solitude for a long time to create the musical material and then I bring it to rehearsal. Sometimes the forms are complete, but usually I prefer to give myself the chance to experiment with different possibilities. This musical 'sculpting' allows me to make my final forms. The process is a constant back and forth between my solitary work and the space for playing. Working with the Ensemble often enriches my original ideas in unexpected ways." Crucial for "impermanence" was the idea that singers and instrumentalists are not treated as discreet groups with several members of the ensemble both singing and playing. Three outstanding multi-instrumentalists add a stunning array of colours which are never employed in a demonstrative way. In "maybe 1", the only purely instrumental piece, the Steinway is played by eight musicians simultaneously....

"I work in between the cracks, where the voice starts dancing, where the body starts singing, where the theatre becomes cinema", Meredith Monk once said. "Doyenne of the avant-garde music scene" (Washington Post) and pioneer in what is now called "extended vocal technique", she creates landscapes of sound that unearth feelings, energies, and memories for which we have no words. Her music has been heard in numerous films, including "*Nouvelle Vague*" and "*Histoire(s) du Cinéma*" by Jean-Luc Godard (soundtracks to both on ECM New Series) and "*The Big Lebowski*" by Joel and Ethan Coen, as well as her own "*Book of Days*". Performers of her compositions include the Chorus of the San Francisco Symphony, Kronos Quartet, The Pacific Mozart Ensemble, the Bang On A Can All-Stars, Björk, DJ Spooky and many others. Monk has been recording for ECM since 1981 ("Dolmen Music" won a Preis der deutschen Schallplattenkritik). Detailed information on the artist, her biography and ongoing activities can be found on <http://www.meredithmonk.org>