

Preview**CIM Mixon Masters Series:
a conversation with Meredith Monk**

by Mike Telin



Composer, singer, director/choreographer and creator of new opera, music-theater works, films and installations, Meredith Monk is a pioneer in what is now called extended vocal technique and interdisciplinary performance. Over the last five decades, she has been hailed as “a magician of the voice” and “one of America’s coolest composers.”

On Friday, February 21 beginning at 8:00 pm the legendary [Meredith Monk](#) brings her unique brand of artistry to the Cleveland Institute of Music as part of the Mixon Hall Masters Series. The concert features Monk’s *Songs from the Hill*, *Volcano Songs*, and *Music for Voice and Piano* (1972-2006) including *Gotham Lullaby*, *Travelling*, *Madwoman’s Vision*, *Choosing Companions* and *The Tale*.

During her celebrated career, Monk has received numerous honors including the MacArthur “Genius” Award, two Guggenheim Fellowships, three Obies and two Bessie awards. She holds honorary Doctorates from Bard College, the University of the Arts, The Juilliard School, the San Francisco Art Institute and the Boston Conservatory. In 2012 she was named Musical America’s Composer of the Year and one of NPR’s 50 Great Voices and received New Music USA’s 2013 Founders Award, a 2011 Yoko Ono Lennon Courage Award for the Arts and a 2012 Doris Duke Artist Award.

A pioneer in site-specific performance, Monk has created such works as *Juice: A Theatre Cantata In 3 Installments* (1969), *Ascension Variations* (2009) and *American Archeology #1: Roosevelt Island* (1994). Her award-winning films include *Ellis Island* (1981) and *Book of Days* (1988).

How does such a versatile artist describe herself? “I’ve always said that I think of myself as a verb rather than a noun because I’m just engaged in making things,” Meredith Monk said during a recent telephone interview. “I think of my work as a tree with two branches. One is the music and exploration of the human voice and all it. And the other is multidisciplinary or multi-perceptual that combines live music, theatre pieces, film or installations. And that’s pretty much what I’ve done my whole life.”

Monk was born in New York City in 1942 to a musical family. Her great grandfather was a cantor in Russia and her grandfather was a singer, but it was her mother who provided her early musical memories. "I was basically hanging out in the CBS control room for a lot of my childhood. My mother was the original Muriel Cigar singer. She also sang Blue Bonnet margarine, Schaefer Beer, Royal Pudding and [laughing] what I remember the most is that everyday at 1:00 pm she sang the DUZ Does Everything soap commercial on a soap opera called "The Road of Life". I remember seeing all the actors – it had very much of a Woody Allen's Radio Days kind of look to it."

"I was very musical as a child," Monk recalls. "I was always singing melodies and I was very rhythmic. But I was also quite uncoordinated because of having strabismus – the two eyes don't work together, so I'm seeing one image in one eye and another in the other eye. So as a kid maybe my right left coordination wasn't that great."

To help overcome these problems, her mother enrolled her young daughter in Dalcroze Eurhythmics classes, which she describes as a wonderful integration of music and movement. "I don't know how my mother heard about the Dalcroze but there were two Polish sisters who taught it at Steinway Hall. I started when I was three and I just loved it. It's interesting because most kids learn music through their bodies in Dalcroze, but because I knew music very well even at three years old, I learned my body through the music.

"A few years ago I was doing a little research and realized that Emile Jaques-Dalcroze who taught at the conservatory in Geneva, had a few students who were having a lot of trouble with rhythm and he realized that he could teach rhythm by making up rhythmic physical exercises. It is a three-pronged pedagogical method because it's rhythmic exercises and working with rhythm sticks, the second part is improvisation and the third part is solfege. So you're getting this incredible [training] in thinking about music. I always tell people who have kids to try to see if they can find a class."

During Friday's concert Monk will perform selections of older and newer solo and accompanied vocal compositions. The concert will also include selections from *Impermanence*, a multi-disciplinary work she began shortly after her life suddenly changed. "My partner died and I was really in an extreme grieving mode," she recalled. "About a month later I got an e-mail from an organization in London called [Rosetta Life](#). They're a very interesting organization that sends artists out to hospices all over England to help people who are in the dying process or have had a terminal diagnosis. They encourage the people to make artwork about their experience one way or another. There was a man who wrote poetry, so a poet came to help him write a poem and there was a woman who wanted to make a Broadway show about her dying process. So they sent in a choreographer and a composer."

Although Meredith Monk was initially approached to compose the music for a festival of works the people in the program had made, she told them she would rather create a new piece. At the moment she was thinking about the notion of impermanence twenty-four hours a day. "They agreed but they wanted the people to somehow participate in the piece." Monk began by going to England and giving a workshop, "We had a great time. I sang [The Tale](#) for them and we just did a lot of talking. They didn't really know each other which was great. There was a lot of laughter and a lot of pain control advice for each other. It was really amazing."

For her, Monk said it really became a matter of figuring out how to create something that is worthy of the people and what they're experiencing. "What they're going through is a lot different from the grieving process, I realized that right away. And everybody's process is different." For that work Monk photographed close-ups of the participants' faces. "Some of the people didn't make it to the premiere, but their faces were there. Their families were so happy about that. I also had them sing something on tape to play when the audience walked in."

Monk found the biggest challenge was figuring out how to make an abstract poetic piece about something you can't really make a piece about. "One of my Buddhist teachers said it was kind of an oxymoron to make a form about impermanence, so it's only an attempt." Like many of her works, *Impermanence* intersects the worlds of spirituality and art. "That is what I'm trying for: how do you make a form, how do you offer sacred space in this world where everybody's running around and their minds are going a mile a minute and how do you offer an alternative to that for even an hour and a half?"

As for her Mixon Hall performance, she said, "I saw the beautiful photograph of the hall and it just looks out of this world. I hope people will come and enjoy the concert and have a good time. There is a gamut of textures and feelings and humor — and not humor. I try to make a concert that's like a good meal and I hope people will just enjoy it."

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