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Music Review | Meredith Monk

# Bending Melodies on the Way to an Otherworldly Quest

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

The wonder of [Meredith Monk](#) is that having created a musical language and theatrical style, she has been able to stretch and refine them with just about every work. Her recent music, including “Songs of Ascension,” a collaboration with the video artist [Ann Hamilton](#), which opened at the BAM Harvey Theater on Wednesday, sounds nothing like the assertive pieces she wrote and sang in the 1980s. Yet enough musical DNA remains, in the form of idiosyncratic warbling and interlocking rhythms, that you would not mistake it for anyone else’s work.

Ms. Monk has written that her inspiration for “Songs of Ascension” was the imagery associated with spiritual quests, including the circular symbols of Buddhism, and the sense of spiritual ascension common to many religions.

Circling was plentiful. In several of the work’s sections, Ms. Monk and her singers (formally, Meredith Monk and Vocal Ensemble) and the accompanying musicians (the Todd Reynolds String Quartet, with John Hollenbeck on percussion and Bohdan Hilash playing winds) were deployed in circular formations, either moving or static. And Ms. Hamilton’s shadowy fast-moving projections were shown not only on the back wall of the stage but on the theater’s walls as well, surrounding the audience.

Ascension imagery was more scarce; the singers were as likely to descend (moving down the theater’s aisles, toward the stage) as to ascend, although the sudden appearance of large choirs in the balcony had the effect of pulling the music (or at least, the audience’s attention) upward.

That said, Ms. Monk’s music and staging are serene, slow-moving and decidedly ritualistic. Her stage pictures are in constant flux, as singers and instrumentalists rearrange themselves, sometimes in opposing lines (the players across the front of the stage and the singers in a small circle at the back, or the singers to the right and the players to the left), more often interspersed.

At times Ms. Monk’s score hints at antiquity. One piece (no titles are given for the individual songs) has a soprano singing a solo passage that evokes plainchant. But the historical allusion is fleeting: the other musicians gradually add lines of counterpoint until the texture becomes fascinatingly complex. Much of the string writing has the insistent repetitiveness of early Minimalism. But those Minimalist figures regularly blossom into

more complex styles: late Brahmsian string writing and Vaughan Williams-like choral polyphony, for example.

Ms. Monk's use of her own invented language underscores the sense of otherworldly mystery inherent in the piece. Often, her vocalizations, matched by her singers, suggest bird song or the calls of nocturnal forest animals. Elsewhere, they seem to be strings of cognates: you have no idea what she's singing about, but you have the odd feeling that you do.

The members of Ms. Monk's ensemble are thoroughly drilled in her musical style, and they perform it expertly. The instrumentalists seemed comfortable with it, as well, even though they were often required to move around the stage as they played (even the cellist, Ha-Yang Kim).