

■ MEREDITH MONK

Cracking the secret code to enjoying music

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN
VANCOUVER SUN

Almost the first thing Meredith Monk says when I reach her on the phone is to thank me for changing the day of the interview. "Thanks so much for doing it today rather than yesterday," she says. "I really appreciate it."

What's unusual is that Monk seems genuine. She really sounds like she means it — plus she's changed the usual sequence where a reporter thanks whomever for agreeing to an answer. But then Monk isn't like most of the people.

She's the only one, for example, who has performed in a 4½ hour concert organized to celebrate 40 years as a discipline-breaking artist in New York's Carnegie Hall. The concert, which featured performers such as Bjork, DJ Spooky, Bruce Brubaker, John Zorn and the Bang on a Can All-Stars, was on Sunday and the experienced left her so drained, she didn't realize how tired she was. She took a bit of a voice break Monday, hence the delay in the interview.

How was the concert?

"It was just incredible. The audience went wild from the beginning to the end," she said, laughing at the memory of it.

Monk is the kind of artist who defies classification. In describing her own work, Monk said in one interview that her goal is to create art that "seeks to re-establish the unity existing in music, theatre and dance, the wholeness that is found in cultures where performing-arts practice is considered a spiritual discipline with healing and transformative power."

For Monk, her work starts with music that's almost bred in the bone. She's a fourth-generation singer whose great-grandfather was a cantor in Russia, grandfather a bass-baritone, and mother a singer for CBS. Monk studied piano starting at age three but had problems as a youngster with her physical coordination. By studying Dalcroze Eurhythmics, she learned movement through music — rather than the other way around.

Shortly after graduating from Sarah

Lawrence in 1964, Monk began to wow audiences with her performances, especially through her unique use of the voice. She's a pioneer in what's called extended vocal technique — a method of using the voice as an instrument to create sounds that are otherworldly and deeply emotional.

A reviewer in the *New York Times Magazine* described one of her vocal works as "an incantation." Another said she had a "one-of-a-kind vocal instrument" that produced sounds that are "haunting, poignant, terrifying and sometimes screamingly funny." Monk herself has said that she works "in between the cracks, where the voice starts dancing, where the body starts singing."

Monk starts looking for those cracks every day by playing her piano and singing. That's where she finds the seeds of whatever it is that she eventually creates. Monk throws the seeds on the earth and then waits to see which ones germinate and grow and which ones don't. Then she gathers her vegetables and puts them in a pot of water on the stove where she lets them simmer and boil and cook down — what's left is the essence.

Her highly intuitive process aims to find sounds that are timeless.

"I think that as technology speeds up, our experience becomes more indirect," she said from New York.

"We have many, many things that are coming at us and in a sense these things are very much designed to divert our attention. As the diversions multiply, I think what happens we become less and less in contact with ourselves and our internal world — with that quiet that you really need to have to make that connection with yourself."

"What I'm trying to do in my work is to provide direct experience — bypassing that filter that we have of naming things, of that constant chatter we have in our minds. For me, and for so many artists that I have a lot of respect for, we're trying to find experience that's nameless."

"And I think the society that we live in is very frightened of experience that you cannot put into a box that you don't have a name for."



Meredith Monk and her Vocal Ensemble will perform at the Chan Centre at the University of B.C. on Saturday at 8 p.m.

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