

MEREDITH MONK

ME AND MY PAL BJORK

BY TONY MONTAGUE

Meredith Monk speaks softly from her New York home to avoid straining her swollen vocal cords. It's the morning after a four-hour marathon concert at Carnegie Hall to mark her 40th anniversary as a professional artist — an event that featured a string of special guests, including a certain Icelandic icon.

"Bjork did one of my songs, *Gotham Lullaby*. I'd heard her sing that in a performance with the Brodsky String Quartet on an MP3 file one of my [voice] students gave me, and I found it really interesting. Then we met six months ago, and liked each other very much. She's a lovely spirit."

It's easy to understand the mutual attraction. Both women are musical adventurers who use the voice as their primary instrument and refuse to follow convention or to repeat themselves. In Monk's case, that's meant inventing a new wordless language for each of her songs — usually by adding choreography of movement and gesture, and often video images.

Monk began experimenting at an early age. "I realized there was a very physical and kinetic relationship between the body and the voice, that the voice could have a kind of articulation, flexibility and fluidity like the body, and that within it you could have limitless colours, worlds, textures, timbres, landscapes, characters," she says.

"By thinking of the voice more as an abstract instrument, there was much to discover, because it delineates energies for which we don't have words. It goes between the emotions. I'm always trying to work with a sense of direct experience. . . . I'm working with the nameless."

Monk's creations are curiously free of temporal and cultural markers. On *Mercy*, her latest recording, the songs suggest by turns Gregorian chant, Inuit throat-singing, Erik Satie's piano compositions, flocks of seagull and geese, Balinese gamelan, Scandinavian cattle-herding calls and the scat vocalizations of jazz. What emerges is music that's fresh, accessible and essential. "My sensibility has always been to try for a kind of transparency. I tend not to like things too thick, and I never work for effect," she says.

When Monk performs at the Chan tomorrow, she'll present most of the songs on *Mercy* with three singers from her vocal ensemble

and two multi-instrumentalists. "We're doing all the crucial parts. The program starts out with three a cappella pieces, and ends with *Turtle Dreams*, which I wrote in the early eighties for voice, keyboards and movement. It's a very challenging piece to do."

While her work is always daring, Monk dislikes the tag "avant-garde": "It's meaningless to me. There's nothing new under the sun, things cycle back around. . . . Nobody's ahead of anybody else."

Monk considers herself lucky to have found a strong and loyal audience early in her career, and she is excited that in recent years her performances have drawn a growing number of young listeners.

The friendship between Monk and Bjork will doubtless inspire a further wave of fans and interdisciplinary artists, especially since the two have started working on a collaborative piece, and will perform together in a year's time.

"Our respective creations sound, look and manifest themselves differently, but there's something in their inquisitive spirit that we have in common," says Monk. "We'll see where that goes."

Meredith Monk discusses her work at 7 p.m. tonight at The Ironworks, 235 Alexander St., 604-662-4717, and performs tomorrow at 8 p.m. at The Chan Centre, 6562 Crescent Rd., 604-280-3311.

Special to The Globe and Mail



SCOTT SCHAFER

Musical adventurer Meredith Monk has struck up a friendship with Icelandic icon Bjork.