The Voice as Gesture in Meredith Monk's *ATLAS*

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Abstract

Meredith Monk's multi-modal work incorporates theatre, dance, film and music. Her claim is that music and specifically the voice lie at the heart of all her work. At this core, she uses auditory gesture in wordless vocal lines to express her meaning, usually the hidden narrative of emotion, to enable universal intelligibility. This thesis uses the concept of *gestus* in the sense of Brecht and Weill as an instrument to examine vocal gesture in three scenes in Monk's opera *ATLAS*, and then relates it to her compositional process. It also studies *gestus* in connection with Monk's biography and the influences on her especially Emile Jaques-Dalcroze and Antonin Artaud.

L'oeuvre plurimodale de Meredith Monk mêle le théâtre, la danse, le cinéma et la musique. L'artiste prétend toutefois placer la musique, et en particulier la voix, au coeur de son travail de création. En utilisant une gestuelle narrative qui s'exprime sous forme de lignes vocales dénuées de paroles dont la fonction est de souligner le discours secret des émotions, elle espère être entendue par tout public dans le monde. La présente étude fait appel au concept de geste ("gestus") tel que le conçoivent un Brecht ou un Weill afin d'analyser la gestuelle vocale dans trois scènes extraites de l'opéra que Monk intitula *ATLAS*. Il convient ensuite de situer cette dernière dans le processus de composition. Enfin, il est également question du rapport qui existe entre ce "gestus" et la biographie de Monk, de même que l'influence qu'ont pu avoir sur elle Emile Jacques-Dalcroze et Antonin Artaud.

Contents

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1. AN OPENING STATEMENT

This thesis examines gesture and *gestus* in the voice in Meredith Monk's opera *ATLAS*. I will begin with an opening discussion of gesture and *gestus* in the work of Brecht and Weill, with the goal of defining gesture/*gestus* in Monk's work. I will analyze three scenes of Monk's *ATLAS* (1991): *Home Scene, Loss Song, Treachery/Temptation* by looking at the vocal lines and extended techniques used along with the narrative. The origins of Monk's work in gesture will be explored by studying her biographical history, her compositional process and her notion of the role of the voice as instrument, and influences. The primary resources of this thesis include Monk's commentary in interviews with the author and others, her own articles and essays, other secondary literature and a recording of *ATLAS*.[1]

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[1] The task of analyzing Meredith Monk's music is really an untouched field. Leslie Lassetter briefly analyzed *Choosing Companions* from *ATLAS* ("Opera From Elsewhere: Meredith Monk's *ATLAS*," *Sonneck Society Bulletin* Vol. 20, No.3 (Fall 1994): 10-14.) and David Gere analyzed *Quarry*, but the task has not really been undertaken as far as I can tell from the vast array of literature that exists on Monk. Her website includes a bibliography which lists her own articles and essays, dissertations, reviews of performances and recordings, mentions in newspapers, articles and interviews. The website also contains a calendar of performances, discography and question and answers section with Monk (www.meredithmonk.org). Sally Banes, Deborah Jowitt and Bonnie Marranca (all dance/theatre critics and writers) have written lengthy articles about Monk. Sally Banes's book *Terpsichore in Sneakers* is an excellent overview of Monk's work as well as many other choreographers of her generation as is her book *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*. Marranca's article about *ATLAS* is excellent: "Meredith Monk's *ATLAS* of Sound: New Opera and the American Performance Tradition" by Bonnie Marranca in *Ecologies of Theater*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 224-232. Bonnie Marranca is also editor of the *Performing Arts Journal*. Deborah Jowitt is editor of a book all about Monk: *Meredith Monk* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). The book is not actually a biography, but rather a collection of essays and reviews, Monk's journal entries and process notes. There are a number of extensive interviews and the best are by Frank J. Oteri (www.newmusicbox.com), William Duckworth (in *Talking Music)*, and Eleonora Beck (in *Women's Quarterly Magazine*). There are four dissertations in English that I know of that deal mainly with the theatre and choreography in Monk's works. There are approximately 2 other dissertations in Italian which both concentrate on Monk's theatre. David Gere's dissertation offers an excellent and extensive ethnomusicological analysis of *Quarry*, one of Monk's earlier large-scale works. His is the only work that looks at Monk's work from a musical perspective. (*Swallowing Technology: An Ethnomusicological Analysis of Meredith Monk's 'Quarry.'* M.A. Dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1991). Kathryn Sarell studies Monk's performance works from a postmodern feminist perspective, but does not focus on her music. (*The Performance works of Meredith Monk and*

2. GESTURE IN THE VOICE

Exactly which aspect of Meredith Monk's works have made them so successful? For the most part her works are extravagant, visual and musical feasts that bring rich vocal writing and bizarre images to audiences. All of the elements in her works including the theatre, movement and music contribute to their success, but as Monk says herself there is really only one central element that gives the works depth, solidity and richness. Her pieces are not models of Wagner's envisioned *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which all parts are equal, but rather are works in which the elements circle around one point: music and even more specifically, the voice. Monk often uses the image of a tree with two large branches to describe her work.[2] The tree as a whole represents her work, one branch reflects the interdisciplinary nature of her works, the theatre, movement, image and film; but the largest and by far the most important branch is the music and part of that is the voice. At one point during an interview I asked Monk how she thought her music should be analyzed. She talked about the role of music in her work and about that the fact that her music is so rarely analyzed at all. She talked about music as the 'essence' of her work:

Martha Clarke: a postmodern, feminist perspective. Ph.D dissertation, University of Colorado, 1993.) Elizabeth Pappas's chapter about Monk is a brief introduction to Monk as a performance artist and is incorporated into her dissertation as a way of analyzing not so much Monk's work, but her own. The dissertation is actually more of a study of performance and uses Monk as an example of performance style. (*Contemporary Performance Art Composition: Postmodernism, feminism, and voice*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1996.) Myrna Francis Schloss's thesis is an excellent work, but again looks not directly at Monk's music, but rather how her works express a feminist agenda. Monk is used as an example along with Joan La Barbara and Pauline Oliveros. There are some interesting interviews with Monk that Schloss conducted herself. (*Out of the Twentieth Century: Three Composers, Three Musics, One Femininity*. Ph.D. dissertation, Wesleyan University, 1993). But there has been little writing from a musicological perspective when considering the fact that Monk has repeatedly stated that she is primarily *a composer* and that her music is the central component in her work. (Recent developments: Dr. Paul Attinello, a musicologist living in Australia, has begun work on a book about Monk. This is an exciting new development in Monk studies and I have been in touch with Attinello to discuss his work. Monk also seems to be very pleased about this new work. It is something she has been waiting for for a long time.)

> I'd rather have my music analyzed. One of the things that has been rather frustrating is that it hasn't been analyzed in a very serious way...I do solo vocal concerts all over the world, just me singing and playing the piano and I don't feel as if anything is missing. If you see me doing a solo vocal concert, you've got the essence of my work. I would never do a concert of dance, I would never do a concert of theatre and I'd never do a concert of images alone, never. But I would do concerts of music alone...So in a way it's been very disturbing and sad for me that no-one has taken my music away from all these other elements. The ideas I get everyday are in music.[3]

Monk's comment: 'If you see me doing a solo vocal concert, you've got the essence of my work,' is very strong. In it, she almost denies the significance of visual image in her work even though it has played an important part throughout her career. Nevertheless, in solo vocal concerts she does not incorporate visual image into the performance. She relies on the voice to express themes, her poetics, her artistic intentions and vision.

Monk has created and developed a complex and potent vocal palette. The strength in this palette, the aspect that provides the significance in all of her works, is the gesture that is expressed through her vocal lines. This is not the same as physical gesture. It does not involve the movement of limbs or facial expressions, but rather the gestures are exhibited via subtle vocal writing such as a skip upwards of a third at the end of a phrase to indicate the physical gesture of throwing one's hands up in the air in an act of hopelessness.[4] These vocal gestures not only capture corporeal gesture, but because of the flexibility and expressiveness of the voice, also express emotion, attitude, the subconscious, relationships, stories and narrative, all without the added help or accompaniment

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[2] M. Monk, interview with the author, New York City, 2 May 2002.
[3] M. Monk, interview with the author, New York City, 2 May 2002.

of the body: without physical gesture and most importantly without words. Of course, gestures, by their very nature, do not have words, but her vocal lines sound as if they should be texted and one might say that if gestures made sound, Monk has captured those sounds in her writing. In movement, for example, one might make a gesture to support something being said, or make a gesture without saying anything at all to express one's mood or attitude in body language. Monk incorporates these aspects of communication into the voice. It is important to note that it may seem as if much music can capture emotion in the way described above, but in Monk's music she uses only the voice. The fact that she uses the *human* voice to express *human* emotion and attitude adds to the significance of the meaning in her work.

As her remarks cited above show, Monk believes that her work for the unaccompanied voice is capable of expressing everything she wants to say. Instruments, although she does use them, are not a necessary addition because she believes that the voice on its own can make every sound of which she can think.

The significance of the concept of gesture in Monk's vocal works can be brought out in a comparison with the role of *gestus* in the works of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht.[5] Monk's work, as stated above, expresses more than just physical gesture contained in auditory gesture. Her vocal gesture is more like a

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[4] This example is taken from *Home Scene* in *ATLAS* in which after a long and distressing phrase about her daughter, the mother literally throws her voice up in the air as a gesture of hopelessness.

[5] Monk has been compared with Brecht before. In Nancy Spector's article ("The Anti-Narrative: Meredith Monk's Theater," *Parkett Verlag AG* 23 (1990): 110-113), the comparison of Monk and Brecht is based on his 'theorization of a revolutionary or 'epic' theatre,' (p.110). Spector comments on how Monk has essentially aimed for the same 'revolutionary theatre' by the way in which she 'orchestrates dramatic situations in which illusions are concocted and then revealed as fabrications.'(p.110) But nowhere in this article or in any others that I have studied is the Brecht comparison used in understanding gesture in Monk's work.

vocal *gestus*. *Gestus* and *gesture* do have somewhat different meanings, and as Peter Ferran writes, 'the term *gestus* has acquired a notorious complexity.' In Latin *gestus* means both gesture and attitude.[6] *Gestus*, as Brecht and Weill understood it, was complicated because it also contains abstract concepts. Ferran explains that however abstract the *gestus* may be (in the way that I'm adapting the idea of a *gestus* for Monk's works), its meaning always contains the following: '...social behaviour; attitudinal perspective; demonstrative enactment,' and essentially 'point of view.'[7] Another useful definition can be found in *Untwisting the Serpent*. Albright writes: 'The highest goal of gestus is to eliminate all ambiguity of interpretation: it is a hieroglyph but without oracular fog.'[8] Albright describes *gestus* as a clear gesture filled with meaning and as he says above, without the ambiguity that one might, perhaps, expect. He continues by adding that in gestic music a '...composer strives to create a pattern of sound that specifies a precise bodily movement, a precise inflection of speech.'[9] This description is very close to Monk's work with the voice. The *gestus* in music is the '...rational analysis of human affairs.'[10] Shuhei Hosokawa further describes it as:

> ...the mimic and gestic expression of the social relationships existing between people in a certain epoch...the gestus condenses the narrative to be interpreted by the spectators.[11]

Brecht and Weill's *gestus* required a 'gestic music' which in turn could 'articulate that which the text [did] not make explicit and thereby provide a subtext ready-

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[6] M. Morley, "'Suiting the Action to the Word:' Some Observations on Gestus and Gestische Musik," in *A New Orpheus*, ed. K. Kowalke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p.186
[7] Peter W. Ferran, *The Threepenny Songs: Cabaret and the Lyrical Gestus, p.7*
[8] D. Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.112.
[9] Albright, p.112.
[10] Albright, p.112.

made for the performer.'[12] Although the two men did not entirely agree on the exact uses of *gestus* and its proper meaning, the fundamental concept of *gestus* remained the same: '...an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions,'[13] and in Weill's and Monk's case, music. For Brecht, *gestus* was the clear and stylised presentation of the social behaviour of human beings and so one of his main concerns was always the question of *communication* and *delivery*, the *transmission* to an audience of an action, an emotion, a state of mind in gestic terms.[14] Michael Morley elaborates on what exactly this would mean for both librettist and composer in a work. For the librettist, the words spoken had to convey the gestic goal of the speaker, while for the composer, gestic music required a rhythmic shape that embodied the ebb and flow of speech patterns and the gist of thought itself.[15] Weill, in 'Concerning the Gestic Character of Music,' considers the aspects of music which make it appropriate to the theater. He concludes that music can:

> ...reproduce the *gestus* on stage. It can even create a type of fundamental *gestus* which prescribes a definite attitude for the actor and eliminates any doubt or misunderstanding about the respective incident. [16]

He thought that music could define the basic tone and fundamental *gestus* of an event while still allowing the actors to work in their own style. Weill referred to the 'rhythmic fixing of the text' as the source of the gestic music and one can easily see that in almost all of his music, rhythm is exceptionally important.

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[11] S. Hosokawa, "Distance, Gestus, Quotation: Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny of Brecht and Weill,"*International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* (1985), p.183.
[12] K. Kowalke, *Brecht and music: theory and practice*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979), pp.226-7
[13] B. Brecht, in *Brecht on Theatre* ed. J. Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p.42.
[14] M. Morley in *A New Orpheus*, p.184
[15] M. Morley in *A New Orpheus*, p.185
[16] K. Weill in *Kurt Weill in Europe*, ed. K. Kowalke (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979), p.491.

When Monk composes for the voice her 'words,' or her vocal sounds, also convey the gestic direction in which the singer is aiming and the vocal music embodies a strong rhythmic shape that very often incorporates the 'ebb and flow' of speech patterns and the 'gist of thought itself.' Two singers, for example, might communicate clearly without uttering an intelligible word. A perfect example is in *Specimen Days* as Monk and Ching Gonzalez have an ordinary, fairly mundane conversation, without words, while preparing for dinner. The fact that one can recognise the conversation as mundane is priceless! Monk does this by raising the voice at the end of a line to indicate a question, by the perpetual banter, perhaps friendly nagging, the recollection of the days events. One recognises it as this in the way that Monk copies, in the wordless vocal lines, the melodic ups and downs of conversation, the interrupting, and constant 'chit-chat!' She provides the listener with the contour of speech, the rhetoric and the gestures.

One might say that all vocal music replicates speech patterns in its rhythms. However, Monk inverts this in two ways. Firstly, her vocal lines incorporate all the syntax and rhetoric of speech without actually using words and secondly she goes further by expressing the underlying 'words between the lines,' the hidden emotions and thought processes. It is not that she creates an actual language, but rather she conveys emotional information and narrative without semiotics. She communicates with listeners on two levels: 1. through the immediate 'spoken' communication expressed via vocal lines that imitate speech and 2. through the 'unspoken' communication which is ultimately the most important level when expressing *gestus*. The narrative in Monk's work is actually more about the unspoken expression of the soul. It has been said that

her sounds actually come from a culture and language that she has invented herself.[17] However, one has to ask the question whether or not we would be able to 'understand' Monk if this were true and also if she has actually created a *language*. Nevertheless, Monk claims that she is aiming for a universal language though not in a logical sense.

The fundamental difference between what Brecht and Weill were doing in their musical theatre pieces and what Monk achieves in her works is that: Monk uses only the wordless voice to express the *gestus* and meaning in her works. With her vocal lines, she encapsulates a relationship to another person, a thought process, a conversation, a hidden emotion, the subconscious, a story. A good example of this is *Loss Song* from the opera *ATLAS*. A father and mother express their feelings regarding their daughter's recent departure on a long travelling trip. When the father finally opens up to his suppressed emotions, the vocal line is unrelenting. He opens his mouth wide and with each sound pushes out all the breath in his lungs so that the sound is a mixture of cry and breath. The sound because of the way it is sung, is piercing. Monk manages to capture in the voice a range of emotions (longing and grief) and gestures of exasperation and anger at the same time, all without using words. The *gestus* in this scene is a sense of loss which is mixed with the excitement of recognising the daughter's independence and maturity, and a longing for the same excitement in the parent's own lives.

Whereas Brecht required the physical body along with his texts to contain the *gestus*, Monk requires only the voice. The Brecht/Weill notion of *gestus* also diverges from Monk's in that they (especially Brecht) believed that *gestus must*

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[17] E.D. Lerner and G. Sandow, "Meredith Monk," *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*. 1st ed., p. 329.

articulate social behaviour.[18] Monk, on the other hand, reaches more intently for the internalised, personal psychological states. Brecht also had a strong political agenda at the time which he saw fulfilled via *gestus*, something with which Monk is not so concerned even though her works occasionally contain political themes (for example, *Quarry* (1975) concerns the Holocaust). However, *gestus* is incorporated into all their works as a way of delineating the relationships between human beings whether in a social sense in Brecht and in Weill or in a familial, feminist, community, spiritual sense in Monk.

As a 'mosaicist' who often presents her work as sonic and visual tiles, Monk constantly strives to open up new avenues of perception for her audiences and so that, although not referring directly to Monk, Albright eloquently writes:

> ...gestus can be made visible, audible, tactile where the audience has no ready-made pattern of assimilation and deflection; the inscape, the inflex, of the detail becomes telling where there exist no channels for draining the meaning into familiar theatrical excitements.[19]

Indeed Brecht and Weill were always moving away from the 'comfortable' in theatre, away from the non-thinking audience. Monk too has always moved away from the 'familiar theatrical excitements.'

Brecht talked about gestures that were 'strong enough to smell and be carried away by.'[20] Monk creates a *gestus* of the voice that is also strong enough to be carried away by. She talks about reaching hidden depths, of expressing emotions and thoughts too profound to be given life by words, of making her work universal; unhampered by the semantics and inadequacies of language.

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[18] M. Morley in *A New Orpheus*, p.188
[19] Albright, p.112
[20] B. Brecht, *Diaries: 1920-1922*, trans. John Willett (London, 1979) pp. 34-35.

3. *ATLAS*

Many of Monk's works show gestural qualities in the voice. The work I have chosen to look at more closely is *ATLAS*.[21] I will examine three scenes in *ATLAS: Home Scene, Loss Song* and *Treachery/Temptation.* I have transcribed each scene from a recording[22] of the opera and examined the vocal techniques used, the vocal lines and the way in which they combine to produce a fundamental *gestus* that is expressed primarily through the voice.

ATLAS is one of a number of operas that Monk has written over the decades. It was commissioned by Houston Grand Opera and was the first piece for which Monk was required to notate both the vocal and instrumental parts and work under the auspices of a large opera company. Premiered in 1991, this was certainly one of Monk's largest works to date.[23] Although *ATLAS* is an opera, in many ways Monk was attempting to redefine opera at the same time as writing one. In an interview with Robert Sandla, she talks about her belief that audiences have forgotten what the real meaning of opera is: '...a metaphor for the wholeness of the human organism, the wholeness of human perception.'[24] She called *ATLAS* an opera as a description of a multi-perceptual, mosaic form. In spite of this Monk has commented on the ways in which she could have taken more risks in *ATLAS*:

> ...it's the most narrative piece I've ever done...In some ways I wish I had been more radical when I was contending with all the 'opera' conventions.

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[21] I have chosen to look at three scenes in *ATLAS* because of the consistency in vocal sounds used throughout the opera and subsequent variation of those sounds and also because *ATLAS* has not been analyzed before.

[22] Meredith Monk, *ATLAS: An opera in three parts* performed by Wayne Hankin and Meredith Monk and Ensemble, ECM 1491/92.

[23] *Quarry*, another huge work, was first performed in 1976 with 85 performers, however, the work did not include music to such a large extent as *ATLAS*. *ATLAS* was written in a time when all of Monk's works were focused around the music and therefore required the technique of trained singers.

[24] R. Sandla, "Dream Weaver," *Opera News* (Feb 16, 1991), p.11

> I had originally wanted to do *ATLAS* in another space, but was not allowed.[25]

Nevertheless, the rehearsal style Monk used for *ATLAS* was very different than the norm. Over three hundred singers were auditioned in workshop style sessions. She wanted the auditions to reflect the way in which she normally works and so singers were asked to perform in groups, improvising parts, adding movement and responding to each other. As Monk says: '...choosing performers who could cross boundaries was of primary importance.'[26] On choosing her singers, she met with them even though the score was incomplete. The rehearsal period was a luxurious twelve weeks (absolutely unheard of in the opera world) and was, in Monk's words: 'an utterly generous, radiant time.'[27] Musical and movement motifs were given to the ensemble who worked with them and expanded them with improvisatory rehearsal techniques until they became fixed and notated. Monk also asked each of the singers to learn every vocal part in the opera something that Randy Wong says: '...made the piece more of an organic entity than is usual for an opera. We all knew everyone else's part.'[28] Once the vocal parts were fixed, the opera was orchestrated.

In a Statement of Concept written for the Houston Grand Opera, Monk described three different manifestations of a basic theme for the opera then called 'Ghost Stories.' There were certain elements that Monk had a very clear idea about right from the beginning. She knew that the final work would include music that:

> ...has the radiance and resonance that implies the existence of an invisible world that underlies what we think reality is, but that we rarely notice or

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[25] M. Monk, Interview with the author, New York City, May 2, 2002.
[26] L. Lassetter, "Opera from Elsewhere: Meredith Monk's *ATLAS*," *Sonneck Society Bulletin* Vol.20, No.3 (Fall 1994), p.11.
[27] R. Sandla, p.10
[28] R. Wong, Interview with the author, April 18, 2002, via email.

connect with.[29]

Many of her original ideas were not included in the final opera. Nevertheless, the underlying concepts of the impermanence of life, an ethereal other world, the cycle of one's life and spiritual quest were all included. Monk described all her original ideas as:

> ...seeds which have been planted ready to bloom when the time is right. My job is to cultivate them, water them, nurture them, until the strongest ones come up.[30]

She had a sense of potential in her ideas with the hope that eventually the piece would take on a life of its own.[31]

The opera centers on the life cycle of Alexandra Daniels from adolescence to old age. The character is loosely based on the Frenchwoman and explorer Alexandra David-Neél who lived to be 101, was the first Western woman to visit Lhasa in Tibet, spent years in hermitages meditating and became a Buddhist scholar. In the expedition made by Alexandra (in the opera) and her travelling companions, they journey from season to season, country to country, encountering adventure and danger along the way. The explorers are led by two guides who eventually lead them into a realm of pure energy. The end of the journey is represented by communion with a heavenly choir while observing Earth from above which represents the fulfillment of their quest for spiritual knowledge. The very last scene shows the protagonist, Alexandra, older and filled with wisdom, at home drinking a cup of coffee and recalling her earliest

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[29] M. Monk, "Statement of Concept 'Ghost Stories' for the Houston Grand Opera," Unpublished, n.d., p.1

[30] M. Monk, "Statement of Concept 'Ghost Stories' for the Houston Grand Opera," Unpublished, n.d., p.3

[31] An interesting note at the top of the Statement of Concept to the Houston Grand Opera states that: "This Information is from the original proposal. It is Monk's style to develop the piece through the rehearsal process, therefore the finished work may not follow these ideas at all." This is a good example of how Monk keeps her works completely open!

memory, 'the smell of morning coffee' and her aspiration to 'seek the unknown.'[32] The opera's form is in three parts: 1. Personal Climate, 2. Night Travel, and 3. Invisible Light.

With 'quest' as the main theme in *ATLAS*, the expedition represents a search for peace and spiritual transcendence. It is in fact *gestus*, the *gestus* of the loss of wonder in the modern world and the possibility of rediscovering the miraculous in the quotidian.[33] And in Monk's own words:

> The opera is about spiritual quest and travel becomes the metaphor for the journey of our inner lives. The underlying theme is of spiritual longing, that kind of longing many of us feel in this current "airless" society, a longing for the lost sense of community or spiritual resonance. And like the miracle plays, there is a quest, there is initiation, personal traits and redemption or healing at the end."[34]

To present the quest, Monk followed a particular formula for her story-line:

> There are stages in this type of myth: there's the call, the journey, often a descent into darkness, the revelation or insight, and then returning to pass on that insight.[35]

The young Alexandra receives the call to adventure symbolized in the image of a horse, 'the messenger' as Monk says:[36]

> Basically, *ATLAS* is more about the idea of the female explorer who risks following her own way without the security of knowing what the results will be. It starts with the stirrings that a young woman feels confined in home life and her life cycle. The confrontations that she has are with...spirits from other worlds which are also her own social and psychological demons.[37]

Even though *ATLAS* is ultimately based on the explorer Alexandra David Neél, Monk's description above could also be translated to her own life. She risked

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[32] Max Loppert, jacket notes, *Meredith Monk: ATLAS, an opera in three parts* (ECM 1491/92, 1993)
[33] R. Sandla, p.9-10.
[34] M. Monk, Interview with Eden Graber, *Meredith Monk: The House Foundation for the Arts* (Spring 1991).
[35] D. Hirsh, "Meredith Monk: the Performance Artist Explores *ATLAS*," *New York Native* (May 4, 1992).
[36] M. Monk, Interview with the author, New York City, May 2, 2002.

following her own way at the beginning of her career, she moved away from the original Judson group and she forged out a path exploring her skills and interests. Like Alexandra she has also struggled with her own psychological demons, forces working against a coherent *gestus*.[38]

Monk knew *ATLAS* would disturb some people's expectations of what opera should be. It actually contains many features from the grand-opera tradition: choruses, duets, trios, acts, scenes, huge sets, costume. The most revolutionary aspect is, of course, the lack of words. There are a few scenes in which Monk does use a small amount of text most notably in *Choosing Companions.* [39] But the text is incorporated as a tool for humour, is carefully placed and is never actually sung, but spoken.

ATLAS contains arguably some of the most spectacular solo and ensemble vocal composition Monk has ever written. The range of techniques used and the flexibility required of the voices is staggering. Leslie Lassetter describes one such technique - backward singing:

> ...It is produced from the uvular area of the throat while drawing air in rather than out.[40] The sound is rather like growling...Monk uses this in *Ice Spirits...*[41]

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[37] D. Hirsh.

[38] Monk has often talked about her 'ballet master' mentality when she first started working with other performers: "In the old days, I used to think I could get results by making people terrified...I came from the ballet master mentality. I thought I could just go for the point of vulnerability. I could be pretty mean." Discovering Shambala practice really changed things for her: "I think I just saw how I had imprisoned myself in every way...I think it came from utter despair basically, not as an artist but as a person...I'm learning to work with myself more, rather than short-circuiting it onto other people...I've experienced that if you actually take responsibility, it leaves you space for something else to happen, and then what happens is completely and utterly fascinating." M. Monk in "Avant-Garde Explorer" by Amei Wallach New *York Newsday* (May 13, 1992).

[39] As each of the travellers enter the scene in *Choosing Companions,* they present and describe themselves in short phrases such as "I've got a strong stomach," "Good hiking boots," "I own my own equipment."

[40] This was also a technique used in *Facing North,* a duet Monk wrote for herself and Robert Een a few years after *ATLAS.*

[41] L. Lassetter, "Opera from Elsewhere: Meredith Monk's ATLAS," *Sonneck Society Bulletin* Vol. 20, No.3 (Fall 1994: 12

Monk also uses glottal effects, ululation, siren sounds, animal sounds and male sopranos singing high Cs. In one ensemble piece, the singers tap the person next to them when it is their turn to sing which creates a beautifully harmonious rippling effect (*Other Worlds Revealed*).

Leslie Lassetter asks the question how the story comes across if there is so little text in *ATLAS*. Her answer is: the music, the staging, the lighting, the movements, the gestures, the sets—everything—comes together to communicate the plot.[42] This is true, but I believe she underestimates the power of the vocal music alone and indeed what Monk has said about the voice as the essence of her work.

Home Scene: Part I, Scene III

In *Home Scene* a father and mother discuss their daughter's imminent departure. In the previous scene (*Travel Dream Song*) she was singing excitedly about her upcoming adventure, about her dreams and desires. The parents are now alone and respond to their daughter's request, or rather demand, to leave home and travel abroad.[43]

Home Scene is essentially in 6/8 and is accompanied by a two bar ostinato played by wind instruments and piano[44] which is accented on the offbeats as shown in the transcription. This is repeated throughout the scene and as Monk would say, provides a springboard for the voices. The perpetual motion of the ostinato and the placement of the accents create a swaying, four count.

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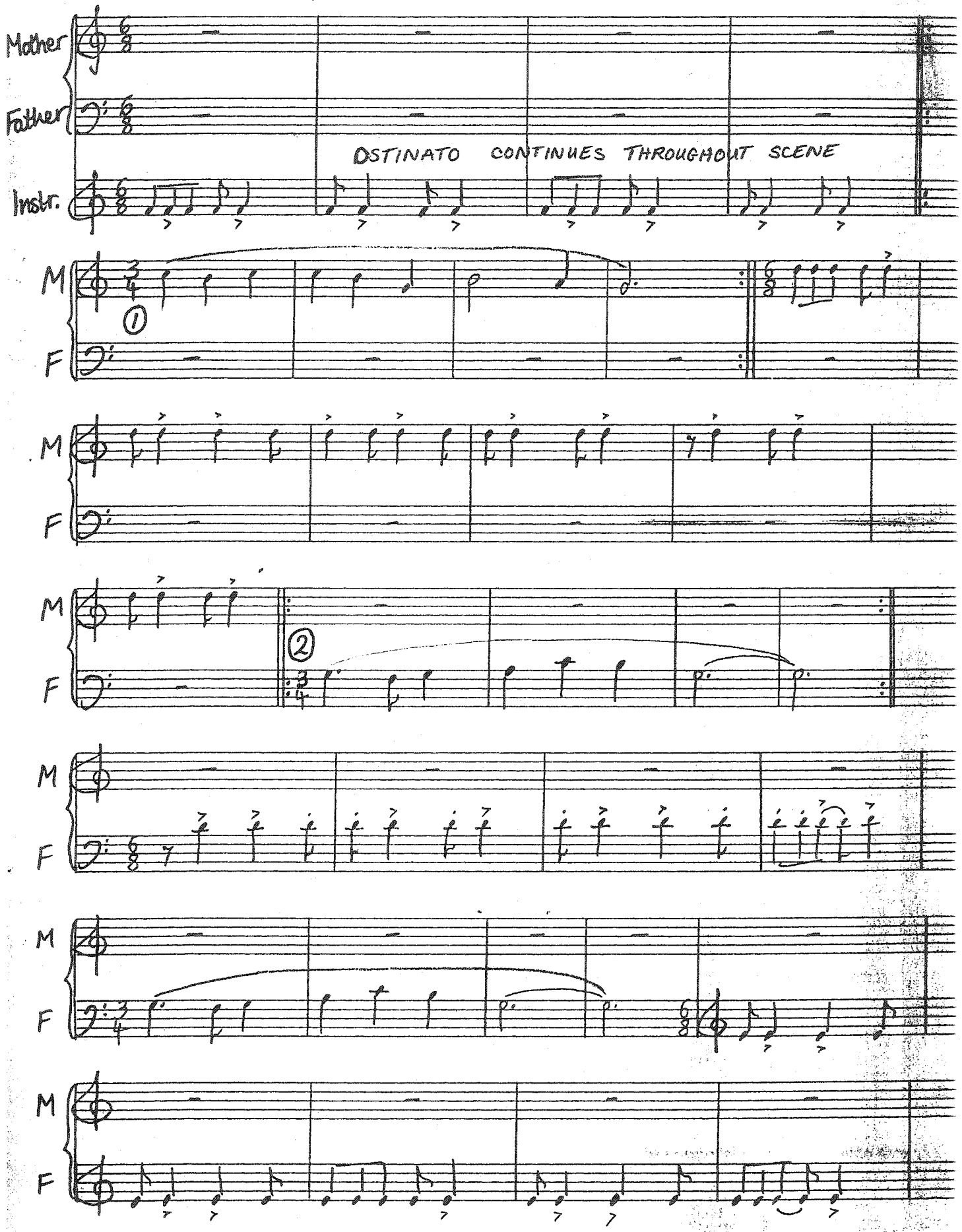
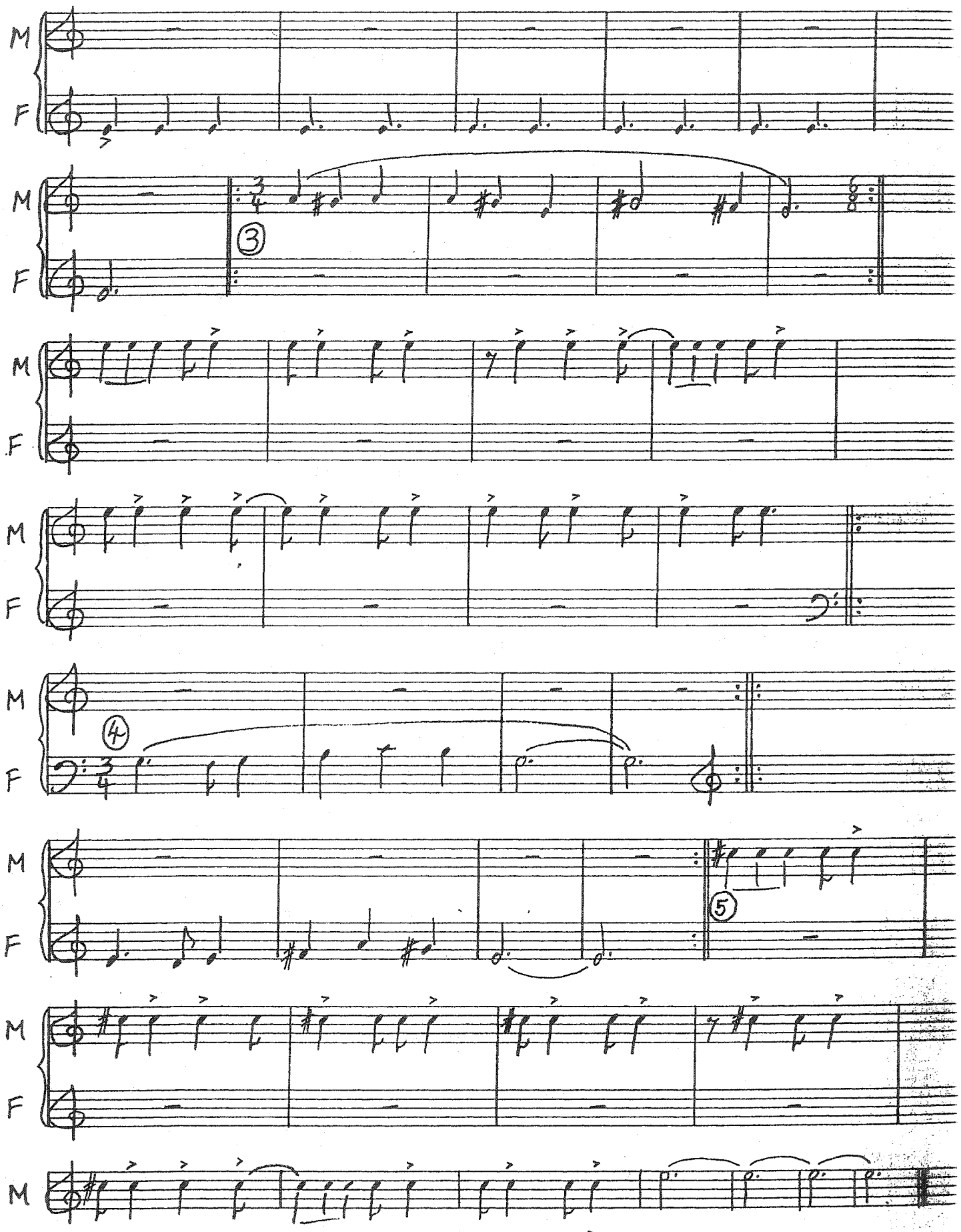
[42] L. Lassetter, p.12.

[43] My interpretation of the immediate narrative in these scenes is derived from having seen a video of the opera and from listening to a recording. One can tell through the vocal lines and staging what the parents and daughter are discussing.

HOME SCENE - ATLAS



HOME SCENE cont'd



INSTRUMENTAL ENDS THE SCENE

For the voices, Monk uses variations on two vocal textures:

1. A legato, melodic line written in 3/4 that illustrates the conversation between the father and mother. (T1)
2. A monotone, staccato line, written in 6/8, frequently accented on the offbeat and always higher in pitch than the melodic line that illustrates the hidden emotional 'conversation.' (T2)

I have divided the score for 'Home Scene' into sections 1-5 (shown in the complete transcription). The description below shows what happens in each section based on a number of factors, for example, the way the vocal line is sung, the dynamic, the vocal technique and the length of the phrases.

In Section 1 the mother begins the discussion with the father in a concerned tone of voice. Her melodic line begins with a minor second which adds a whiny tone and the repeated c_2 also contributes to the worried edge in her voice. The line is repeated twice. If she were speaking text she might be asking her husband if the daughter will be all right and if she should really go away on the trip. After the second repeat the mother's line moves into T2, the staccato, accented monotone. The effect of the breathless monotone juxtaposed against the ostinato exudes concern and anxiety. The mother Monk always begins T2 with 4 eighth notes following the pattern of the ostinato until she veers away from it in the third measure. This perpetual running start expresses an edge of desperation in the mother.

After six bars of T2, the father cuts in with T1 shown in section 2. His melodic line begins with a major second on G_1, rises up to c_1 and then back to the G_1 to end. The entry on G and end on G, along with the major second give the

[44] I transcribed 'Home Scene' from a CD and I am not entirely sure of the mix of instruments playing the ostinato.

line a feeling of warmth. In the recording Tom Bogdan performs it with as much *legato* as possible creating an atmosphere of calm and reassurance for the mother. In 'conversation,' the father comforts the mother, telling her not to worry. He repeats T1 twice and then moves into T2 on d_1 a 5th above his starting G_1. Before he sings there is an eighth note rest implying a moment of hesitation. T2 only lasts for four bars and is immediately followed by another repeat of T1. The father seems to have feelings of concern as well, but they are curtailed by T1 and he calms his wife (and himself). After this moment of reassurance, he now leaps up a major sixth to e_1 and begins again in T2. This time it lasts for longer, but after five bars, Monk seems to dissipate the worry by lengthening the notes. They are unaccented, they waver, they are not in strict time and they die away. It is as if the father finally acknowledges his concern and the mother's concern, but then takes control of the situation.

In section 3, the mother begins again with her questions of concern, but T1 is now a minor 3rd lower. She begins, this time, on a_1 and her pleas become more urgent. She has lowered her voice to come closer to the father's pitch or level of emotional response. T1 is repeated and then she moves into T2, but this time it lasts for 8 bars. In the 3rd bar of T2, she rests for an eighth note giving the section an even more breathless, fearful quality. The father is quick to cut in (section 4) and repeats T1 twice to comfort her again. Then Monk does something quite extraordinary. Having repeated T1, the father leaps up to the mother's higher range and repeats T1 twice again now beginning on e_1. The change in pitch reflects the father's concern for the mother as he now attempts to comfort the mother on her emotional level. But it seems as if his attempts are unsuccessful. In section 5, the mother starts T2 again, but now on $c\#_2$, until in a

gesture of hopelessness, she flips up to e_2 at the last moment and holds it for four measures as the accompaniment dies away.

The *gestus* in this scene is expressed on different levels. The first aspect of the *gestus* is established by the rhythmic fixing of the accompaniment: a swaying, four count, two bar ostinato. The *gestus* of this underlying rhythm seems to be the humdrum of daily life and the continuation of necessary things and chores. Monk is making a statement about how life continues like a pendulum despite worries and concerns.

The most important gestic qualities in the piece come from the vocal lines. T1 for the mother expresses concern, worry and questioning while T1 for the father expresses an attitude of reassurance, confidence and calm. T2 communicates their hidden emotions which are something that Monk aims for as much as possible. The breathless monotone and unpredictable rhythms express thought patterns and racing heartbeats. It seems as if the mother and the father are talking to each other, but do not understand each other. The mother repeats her anxious questions and concerns while the father responds with a reassuring comment that does not answer the mother's questions. It seems as if the father is also concerned, but does not express his concern directly to the mother. In the end he tries again to reassure her in vain. She ends the scene with a distressed T2.

Along with the visual narrative of the daughter's departure and the parent's concern, Monk also makes a statement about relationships, about family, about the relationships between men and women, and about the different levels of emotion and thought processes that men and women go through. She shows the audience a traditional patriarchal family: the father is the

head of the household, the mother looks to him for comfort, support and answers. The mother does not believe in her own strength, nor does she believe that she has any of the answers. But then Monk, by exhibiting the hidden emotional world, reveals the father's insecurity in a slightly mocking way. In doing so she also mocks the mother because of her willingness to step back and let the father take control. The *gestus* in this scene illustrates the internal and the personal exhibited in each member of the family.

Early on in her career, Monk made a statement regarding her use of the voice (see p.33).[45] Monk uses two of her points prominently in this piece. Firstly, she uses the voice as a direct line to underlying emotions and feelings through T2. Secondly, she uses the voice as language as in T1. T1 is very clearly the 'texted' part of the scene. The changes in interval, repeated notes and the rise and descent of the melodic line all reflect spoken language. In T2 there is no reflection on spoken language, but rather a deeper communication. The ostinato accompaniment refers back to Note 8 in which Monk talks about 'repeated patterns...creating a carpet...for the voice to run on...cling to, weave through.'[46] The voices, although they frequently deviate from the rhythmic pattern in the ostinato, use it as a base to hold themselves in position. Both T1 and T2 are carefully written in 6/8 even though the offbeat accents make the final performance sound more complicated. It is as if the parents find security and comfort in the *gestus* of the ostinato (humdrum, daily life).

Loss Song: Part II, Scene IV

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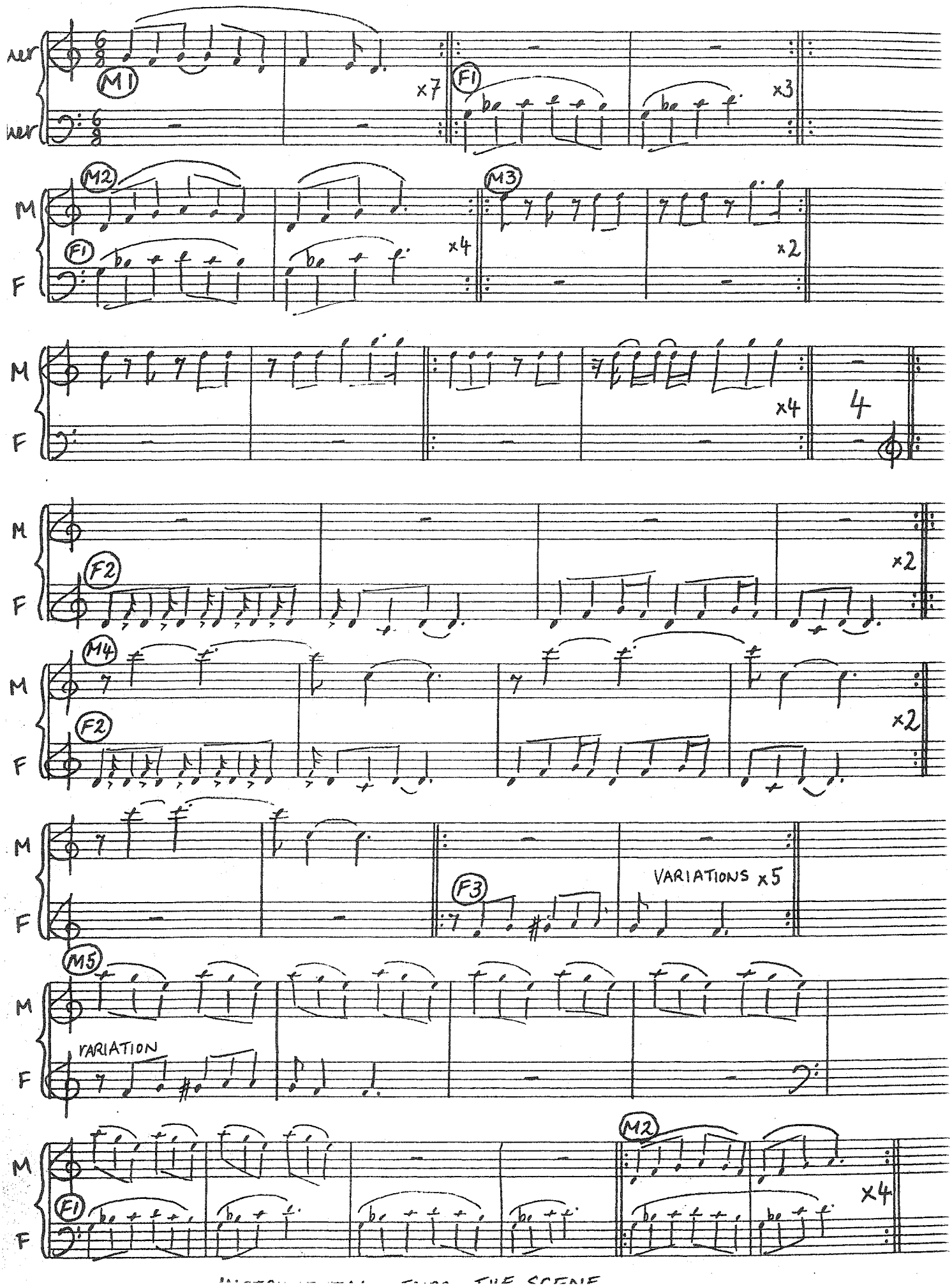
[45] 'Notes on the Voice,' will be discussed at more length in the section 'Two Cornerstone Statements.'

[46] M. Monk in Deborah Jowitt's *Meredith Monk*, p.56

LOSS SONG - ATLAS



Loss Song in Part II of the opera, is a glance back to Alexandra's home after her departure. The mother and father are alone and finally accept that their daughter has gone. She is older, she is a grown woman and is in control of her own life now. This scene also acts as their acceptance of her maturity and of her independent life. *Loss Song* occurs after a number of travelling scenes in which we have seen Alexandra and her companions at the airport, travelling at night and staying with a farming community. It is a revealing show of the previously hidden emotion in the parents.

As in *Home Scene, Loss Song* is structured in overlapping segments, one of Monk's most prominent stylistic traits. In the transcription I show each melodic segment and the way in which they overlap. There is a one-hand piano ostinato throughout the scene which provides a harmonic base. Again, the style of the accompaniment fits with Monk's desire to concentrate on the vocal lines putting expression into the voices rather than into the instruments. If anything, it acts as a similar home base to the one we encountered in *Home Scene* only this time the ostinato is slower and in a minor key.

Each vocal segment is four bars long with the exception of F3 which is expanded through what seems like improvisation. The transcription is in 6/8, but does not include the instrumental ostinato.

The mother has the most variation in her vocal segments which are listed below.

- The first segment (Mother 1 or M1) is exactly the same as her opening vocal line (melodic, step-wise, legato) in *Home Scene* except now she is in the key of D

minor, a fourth lower (previously in G minor) and the first interval is now a major 2nd instead of a minor 2nd.

• M2 is a melodic, stepwise, legato line which is only sung with the father and mirrors his line (F1) exactly a fifth higher.

• M3 is a variation of the mother's T2 in *Home Scene* and is a high pitched, breathless, 'huh' sound in which the breath is pushed out as quickly as possible. In M2, however, the mother makes frequent leaps up to g_3 and does not stay on the monotone d_2 as in T2. M3 also follows a stricter two bar pattern than T2.

• M4 is a loud, scooped c_3 to c_2.

• M5 is a collection of three notes (a_2, g_2, e_2) that are repeated over and over again and sung somewhat piercingly in the beginning. a_2 is always scooped up to from the preceding e_2.

The father has three segments:

• F1 (Father 1) is a melodic, stepwise, legato line in G minor and is often mirrored by the mother a fifth higher.

• F2 is in two parts: the first part is a variation of the d_1 monotone we heard in *Home Scene* (T2). Each d_1 is prefixed with an appoggiatura on f_1 except the grace note is accented each time instead of the other way around. The end of each four bar phrase is finished with a lower neighbour motion: d_1-c_1-d_1. The second part of F2 is actually a slight variation of F1: a melodic line, minor third skip at the beginning (d_1, f_1) and then two lightly sung sixteenths (g_1, f_1) with the same lower neighbour d_1-c_1-d_1 to end the phrase.

• F3 is perhaps the most haunting phrase in *Loss Song* and is sung brilliantly by Tom Bogdan on the recording. It is based on a four measure phrase that rises in stepwise motion, chromatically from time to time, from f_1 to a_1 and back to f_1

except that it sounds more like a monotone toward the end. As each note is sung, the breath is pushed out so that it sounds as if the note were being sung twice only more delicately the second time. As the pitches rise, Bogdan opens his mouth to produce different vowels and so the pitch is never quite exact. (For example, C on 'eee' sounds higher than C on 'aaahh').

At the beginning of the scene, the mother sings alone, lamenting the loss of her daughter. Monk also changes the opening interval to a major 2nd which gives a very different feeling to the minor 2nd in T1 of *Home Scene*. It is as if the mother has come to terms with the loss and her song is no longer so anxious. She talks to her husband about the loss, the daughter is gone and she wants to talk about how she feels. For the first two measures she sings alone before the accompaniment begins. The phrase is repeated seven times before the father responds.

F1, the father's response, is a similar melodic line to the calming, reassuring one he sang in *Home Scene* (T1), except that instead of returning to the starting note at the end of the phrase, he rises up a fifth. This gives the phrase a questioning air and is a good example of how Monk uses simple intervallic change to alter the 'rhetoric' of the unspoken language. The minor key (G minor) adds to the tense quality in his voice. He responds to his wife, but he is not so reassuring this time, he is opening up to his feelings.

After the father has repeated F1 three times, the mother joins him on the same melodic line a fifth higher (M2). They briefly sang together only once before in an earlier scene *Future Quest (The Call)*. It is as if they were finally in harmony with one another (except the perfect fifth creates a hollow sound – a

sound Monk loves!).[47] The duet portrays understanding and acceptance of their life together now without the daughter. But this is not enough to keep away the feelings of loss and the mother breaks into M3. Her breathless delivery is relatively soft to begin. The monotone D of *Home Scene* is now punctuated with high G's in *Loss Song*. The breathless quality is achieved through the repetition of the same phrase and by increasing the dynamic and intensity of the sung pitch. Variations of M3 are shown on the transcription. With each repetition, the mother is more desperate, the attack is intense and the build is dramatic. It seems as if the mother is unable to cope with her emotions. The piercing g_2 is always sung with increasing strength and depicts a *gestus* of uncontrolled emotion, something that is felt too fiercely to suppress.

The father in F2 seems to pick up on the mother's anxiety. F2 is a completely new phrase for him. He begins lightly with the accented grace notes and gradually builds up to the second part of F2 which is high for his voice. As he repeats the phrase, he accents the grace notes producing a harsher sound. The highness of the second part sounds uncontrolled in the father's voice and communicates anxiety and fear. This is only repeated twice before the mother interrupts with a scream (M4) on c_3 which scoops down to c_2. The father repeats F2 two more times with the mother's interruptions. The repeated c_3-c_2 which never actually falls on the downbeat (and hence the interrupting quality) enhances the *gestus* of uncontrolled emotion. The mother repeats M4 once more before the father now interrupts with F3. This phrase is the most difficult to describe because of the singing technique Monk uses. The emotion that spills out of the father's mouth is perhaps the most powerful rendering of pain, loss and

[47] Monk also uses the hollow perfect 5th sound to make a statement about the parents relationship as shown later on.

suppressed emotion in the opera. The phrase is two measures long as usual, but the father soon breaks out of the pattern. Melodically the pitches rise stepwise, if not chromatically sometimes, from f_1 to a_1. These are the highest pitches that the father sings in this scene. With each step he pushes out air and changes the shape of his mouth from oval to round. He repeats the phrase five times alone. First he sounds as if he is beginning to sob, then the sobs become louder, turning into quasi-shouts which give the phrase an element of anger. The phrase becomes more intense, the father is out of time with the ostinato accompaniment and sings each pitch with a new breath. The powerful sound is supported by a huge amount of air which creates the sense of digging down into the body and using the body as a way of pushing out any suppressed feelings through the voice. This particular phrase is a very physical gesture. Monk creates a sound that is both physically gestural and vocally gestural – perhaps the perfect example of gesture in her work and of the voice as flexible as the spine, the moving voice.

The next phrase, M5, is a little surprising. In reaction to the father's outpouring in F3, the mother layers his phrase with a sweet, soft, yet persistent melody which acts as a soothing balm. She is obviously still distressed because the pitches remain high, but her distress is now in reaction to the father. He repeats F3 one more time with her calming layer and then stops while she continues for two bars. Now soothed and controlled, the father returns with his opening line, F1, while the mother continues M5. She stops, he continues with F1 and then she returns again mirroring his line with M2 and they sing together gradually dying out to end. Although they are singing in parallel 5ths, one still

senses the hollow or distance between them. Maybe the hollow sound represents the missing child, who could, in theory, complete the triad.

The motive in this scene could be summarized as one of hidden, uncontrolled emotion. Monk relies on variations of phrases heard in *Home Scene* to create a sense of new uncontrolled emotion in *Loss Song*. Each variation (for example the g_3 leaps in M3 or the accented grace notes in F2) is used as a gesture towards creating the fundamental *gestus* of the piece. As in *Home Scene*, in which Monk made statements about the traditional family setting, she does the same in *Loss Song*. She makes a statement about the relationship of the father and the mother and their independent lives. We find out later on in the opera that *Loss Song* is not only about the parent's loss of their child, but also about feelings of loss in their own individual lives. This is further reflected in *Father's Hope* in Part II, a scene about the father's longing both for his daughter to return and for his own life to return. One can sense that the parents are frustrated with their lives, that they never had the opportunity to travel or go on adventures. Monk's implication here is, of course, that marriage has somehow prevented them from following their own paths and with this, she also makes a social statement about the institution of marriage in our society.

Monk has effectively contained in the *gestus* of this scene, social behaviour, attitudinal perspective and point of view. By looking into the parents relationship she condenses the narrative of their lives into one scene and expresses multiple attitudes (loss, longing, anger, grief, sympathy, compromise, sacrifice) through their wordless voices.

Treachery/Temptation: Part II, Scene XII [48]

Treachery/Temptation is a vocally and emotionally explosive scene sung by Robert Een. The explorers have travelled far and wide and have almost reached the spiritual realm. Each explorer has undergone trials and temptations during the journey and the last, Erik Magnussen now faces his:

> [He] has become weary of the inner and outer hardships of the expedition and is ensnared by his own desire made manifest in the form of a militaristic, technocratic society run amok.[49]

In the production he wears a grey suit and sits at a desk jabbering, whooping, and muttering nonsensical sentences. He finds himself stuck in the horrors of the 9-5 suburban world, brainwashed to push paper and numbers all day long, knowing that his survival counts on his commitment to a pointless job. Monk incorporates some text into this scene although it is barely understandable. She uses clichéd 'work' phrases such as 'finished by five,' as points from which Magnussen moves into psychotic babblings.

The scene is accompanied by a synthesized ostinato which contributes noise more than anything else. A deep, slow 'Jaws' bass adds an element of clichéd danger, but it is the switch between this stupid humour and real life that makes the scene so successful.

The vocal line in *Treachery* is wild. Magnussen laughs, sobs, shouts, speaks and mutters while his voice jumps up two or more octaves and back down again. .The phrase 'Way-yo-eh,' which is used repeatedly throughout the scene, could be seen as a variation of a phrase which also forms the basis of another scene, *Choosing Companions.* In this scene Alexandra chooses her travelling

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[48] I have not transcribed this scene because of the improvised nature of the vocal line. I will describe the techniques used and the structure.

companions by singing a phrase based on 'Hey-yo.' If the travellers answer to 'Hey-yo' in harmony (literally), they are accepted into the group. If they are unable to respond in a harmonious way they are rejected. Magnussen is accepted based on his 'good' response. In *Treachery,* the phrase is distorted. 'Way-yo-eh' sounds unstable as if he were swaying whereas 'Hey-yo' is very confident and self-assured. Ironically, *Treachery* is the scene in which he becomes separated from the rest of the group as if he has lost the harmonious rapport he had to start with. Because of this, 'Way-yo-eh' expresses a *gestus* of false security and as the scene progresses, Een's delivery becomes more and more uncontrolled.

Magnussen begins singing 'Wey-yo-eh' in a low register, loudly and falsely confident. He interrupts with a laugh which sounds both self-assured and on the edge of a breakdown at the same time. It also sounds as if he is laughing at someone in a derogatory way, presumably himself. He repeats the phrase and the laugh then breaks into the first texted segment: 'finished by five, by five, finished by five.' His voice is sarcastically optimistic. He whoops up into his falsetto, makes a siren sound and jumps back into 'Wey-yo-eh, finished by five, finished by five.' He 'sirens' again and into a new sound, stuttering, afraid, moving closer to the edge, spitting out: 'd-d-d-d-d-d-d-d-d.' The stuttering acts as a block which prevents him from moving away from the grip of work. He builds with more whoops, stuttering and sirens, gaining volume and speed, creating an ever-widening hole around him. Then, as if repeating words someone has said to him he switches into a normal voice and says: 'You know you have to, you know you have to do it.' He whoops again only higher, the stuttering increases, he brings himself and the audience into a whirlwind of

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[49] M. Loppert, jacket notes, *Meredith Monk: ATLAS* (ECM 1491/92, 1993).

madness, total abandonment of reason and control. In the production he waves his arms around as if giving orders to an invisible work force. As the stutters increase they slowly turn into small sobs; he is breaking. Then suddenly, the music stops, he stops and says seriously: 'If you put the first one there and the second one here, well then the third one.....aaa...aaa...aaa...' he finally breaks down into heaving sobs; it is all too much. The sobs, fueled by years of pointless, depressing work gradually intensify into wails, and then as if falling off an edge he cries out to end the scene.

Treachery is both hilarious and frightening. The random clichés surrounded by whooping and sobbing are very funny while at the same time Monk crafts a bizarre scene that each of us can relate to. She comments on the individual lives of those who never fulfil their dreams, she comments on the fast-paced, stressful and ultimately destructive lifestyles that so many of us lead and on a society which encourages such living. Robert Een's performance in this scene is staggeringly good. He manages to capture a mélange of emotions, for example, the feigned laugh that is self-assured, nervous and sarcastic all at the same time. The constant whooping and stuttering combine to create a maddening mixture. The stuttering never emerges as a word, but always stays on the edge of saying 'don't.' This particular sound is also used in *Hungry Ghost* (Part II, Scene V) in which one of the travellers is set upon by a ghost who he cannot see, but can sense. As she moves closer to him, he begins to stutter with fear, the same 'd-d-d-d-d-d-d.' Magnussen is also afraid, terrified of the seeming whirlpool of work (and money) that succeeds in finishing him in the end.

In terms of *gestus* Monk creates an atmosphere of fear and madness and makes strong social and personal statements. The *gestus* of fear and humour are

constantly intertwined. As is evident in all of the scenes we have explored, the hidden, underlying emotional turmoil in *Treachery* is displayed as much if not more than the surface 'normal' life.

Having explored the *gestus* and gesture in these three scenes, it is important to examine the origins of this aspect in Monk's work. We begin by looking at Monk's background, then her process of composition, her influences and thoughts on the voice.

4. BEGINNINGS: A little history.

Meredith Monk: mosaicist, lover of space, time, image and the voice, grew up in a musical family. Her mother sang for commercials and musical variety shows on the radio and television; her grandfather was a singer and her grandmother a concert pianist. Surrounded by this musical environment, she says that she sang before she spoke and read music before she could even read words. However, her basic roots are in dance. Her training, which began at the age of three, was very thorough. Along with years of ballet, her mother sent her to Eurhythmics[50] lessons from the age of four mainly because of a vision problem that affected her coordination. Eurhythmics helped her develop her innate rhythmical and musical ability as it has done for students all over the world.[51]

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[50] Jaques-Dalcroze Eurhythmics is a unique approach to Music Education. It is based on the premise that the human body is the source of all musical understanding. Jaques-Dalcroze Eurhythmics allows one to gain a practical, physical experience of music before theorizing and performing. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) was a Swiss composer and pianist. In the early years of the twentieth century, he began to research the effect of human movement on musical perception, and the impact of musical elements on movement technique. Eurhythmics literally means "good rhythm." http://www.Dalcroze.org.au/what.htm. The effect of Eurhythmics on Monk's work will be discussed at greater length later.

[51] M. Monk, www.meredithmonk.org – Questions and answers section.

At Sarah Lawrence Monk began a combined Performing Arts Program continuing with voice, theatre, dance and music working under Bessie Schoenberg, Judith Dunn, and Beverly Schmidt. After graduation in 1964, she moved to New York City where she started performing in galleries and churches and was also involved with the Judson Memorial Church. Formed in 1962, Judson established an atmosphere of experimentation for theatrical dance that sought to move well outside of conventional boundaries and especially those between 'art' and everyday life. The movement was partially inspired by such figures as Merce Cunningham, John Cage and from the composition classes of Robert Dunn. Those leading the group included Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris. They questioned the polished technique in dance and theatre and presented works that dealt with the everyday in the form of games that often included audience members: structure came from any movement or posture, any or no clothes were worn and performances were held in unusual places.

> By incorporating ordinary gestures and mundane events, such as putting on plastic curlers or moving furniture, by bringing what was previously thought of as non-dance onto the performance space (whatever the surface), the choreographers turned conventional reality into unconventional dance.[52]

Yvonne Rainer's statement about these 'reductivist strategies in movement'[53] - "...no to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformation and magic and make believe...,"[54] represents the fundamental concept that guided the Judson choreographers.

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[52] C. Kreemer, *Further Steps: Fifteen Choreographers on Modern Dance,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p.4.
[53] N. Spector "The Anti-Narrative: Meredith Monk's Theater," *Parkett Verlag AG* 23 (1990): 110.
[54] Y. Rainer quoted in S. Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance,* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), p.43.

Although Monk was immersed in this exciting environment of exploration, she eventually moved away from the original Judson 'concepts' and emerged as a leader of a kind of second generation of Judson choreographers (along with Kenneth King and Phoebe Neville). As Sally Banes writes:

> Her program did not involve rinsing dance of spectacle and theatricality--as has, for instance, Yvonne Rainer's--but, rather, exploring the very theatricality of expressive performance.[55]

With a conglomeration of performing skills under her belt, she began to work on the voice, on composition and on creating pieces that incorporated her own highly unique code. Many of her early pieces explored performing spaces themselves, bringing new light to her audience's perception of space and questioning the role of being an audience member. She became a one-woman theater: a choreographer who composed the scores for, and stage directed her own productions.

In 1968 Monk formed The House Foundation, a small, dedicated group of performers and artists who performed in Monk's pieces. It came into being during the Johnson era when it was necessary to be part of a non-profit organization to be eligible for grants. Monk jokes about this saying that in the early years it was 'an organization in name only!'[56] Always based in New York City, The House acts as an integral part of Monk's creative process and the name 'The House' contains a number of meanings: '...a new way of thinking about family, a clearing house, a house as in theatre.'[57] The members, some of whom have been performing with Monk for over twenty years (Robert Een, Andrea Goodman, Lanny Harrison to name a few) are Monk experts, so to speak.

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[55] Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, p.151
[56] M. Monk, Interview with the author, 2 May 2002.
[57] M. Monk, Interview with the author, 2 May 2002.

Currently, The House stores all archival material and Monk's own personal archives. Indeed, she has become an institution of sorts even though she is strongly adverse to the idea of the 'institution.'

At the same time as The House Foundation was formed, Monk had a groundbreaking revelation:

> ...I realized I could work with my voice the way that I had with my body. At Sarah Lawrence, I had worked very hard to create a personal movement vocabulary and an idiosyncratic choreographic style from my own physical rhythms and impulses. That day at the piano, I saw that I could literally make a vocabulary built on my own vocal instrument and that within the voice there were limitless possibilities of timbre, texture, landscape, character, gender, ways of producing sound.[58]

This idea became the foundation on which she built the rest of her works. Ten years later Monk formed a small Vocal Ensemble. Her works were expanding, and she wanted to teach her techniques to others. Monk's Vocal Ensemble is made up of remarkable singer/dancer/actors and because of this she has been able to create more musically complex pieces. But she has also worked to retain the "raw, rough, visceral impulses of my early work with singers who have such refined skills, while exploring new possibilities and qualities."[59] The members of The House, who come and go depending on the piece being performed, were not always as well trained in movement and voice as she. Even so, her decisions were never made solely on the basis of technical virtuosity; she always took the whole person into account.

Monk has created a large number of works to date that range from intimate performances in her own loft to full-scale operas and films. Her multi-media works frequently defy categorization. She once referred to them as 'mixed pickles' meaning that her works not only incorporate dance, theatre and

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[58] M. Monk in Johnson, P. and K. McLean, eds. *Art Performs Life: Merce Cunningham/Meredith Monk/Bill T. Jones*, (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1998), p.74

music, but also many small messages (spiritual, comments on art itself, on the state of society, on the family).

5. TWO CORNER STONE STATEMENTS

Monk has made two 'formal' statements about her work and her mission. They both serve as the cornerstones or keys to all of her work. The first was a statement that she made very early on in her career (around 1968), just after she had the revelation about the voice. In the early 1980s Monk also wrote a mission statement that reflected her hopes and visions for her own solo work as well as the pieces that included members of The House (formed in 1978). They are both reprinted below in full interspersed with my comments:

Notes on the Voice:

1. *The voice as a tool for discovering, activating, remembering, uncovering, demonstrating primordial/prelogical consciousness.*

This is also a feminist statement, rejecting the world of Logos, the phallocentric spoken language.

2. *The voice as a means of becoming, portraying, embodying, incarnating another spirit.*

Here spirit is communicated through the voice, the voice takes on the gesture of another spirit.

3. *The dancing voice. The voice as flexible as the spine.*

Monk wants to give the voice corporeality, to turn it into a solid body, capable of gesture like the body.

4. *The voice as a direct line to the emotions. The full spectrum of emotion. Feelings that we have no words for.*

Monk wants to communicate on two levels: immediate and hidden.

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[59] M. Monk in *Art Performs Life*, p.76

5. *The vocal landscape.*

Here she gives the voice visual capacity, able to create a visual scene that one does not actually see.

6. *The body of the voice/the voice of the body.*

Again, she refers to the corporeality of the voice.

7. *The voice as a manifestation of the self, persona or personas.*

Monk sees the voice as capable of expressing any gender, age or physicality.

8. *Working with a companion (the accompanying instrument: organ, piano, glass, etc.): repeated patterns or drone creating a carpet, a tapestry of sound for the voice to run on, fly over, slide down, cling to, weave through.*

The accompaniment always works as a foundation or springboard for the voice.

9. *The voice as language*

This is Monk's most frequent point about the voice. She uses the voice to communicate without words.

10. *Chronological discoveries:*

(In this last point Monk goes through different pieces she has written and the ways in which she used the voice in each piece.)[60]

Her mission statement is as follows:

My goals:
To create an art that breaks down boundaries between the disciplines, an art that in turn becomes a metaphor for opening up thought, perception, experience.
An art that is inclusive, rather than exclusive; that is expansive, whole, human, multidimensional.
An art that cleanses the senses, that offers insight, feeling, magic. That allows the public to perhaps see familiar things in a new, fresh way--that gives them the possibility of feeling more alive.

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[60] M. Monk in D. Jowitt, *Meredith Monk, p.56.*

An art that seeks to re-establish the unity existing in music, theater, and dance--the wholeness that is found in cultures where performing arts practice is considered a spiritual discipline with healing and transformative power. An art that reaches toward emotion we have no words for, that we barely remember--an art that affirms the world of feeling in a time and society--where feelings are in danger of being eliminated.[61]

Her 'Notes on the Voice' are a clear and fascinating description of her ideas about how exactly she wanted to use the voice in her works.[62] Although she does not refer directly to *gestus* by name, it is implied in some of the lines. She talks about the voice taking on the physical spirit of another body or one might

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[61] M. Monk in D. Jowitt, *Meredith Monk, p.17.*

[62] This is something that has been broadened to include instruments. Monk was recently commissioned to write a piece for the New World Symphony and San Francisco Symphony something she has never done before. Even with this new challenge, Monk still maintains that 'until I stop being utterly fascinated with the human voice, I feel that I'll pretty much stay with the voice.' (MM in interview with Frank J. Oteri). This new venture for Monk will include a few solo singers and as is usual in her works the instrumental writing will be fairly simple. Monk explains why she made this decision: "I've deliberately kept my instrumental writing very simple. I know for some people, it seems simple-minded, but for me it's more a way to provide a lot of space in the sound so that the vocal parts can be as complex as possible." (MM in interview with Frank J. Oteri). The symphony will be an interesting turning point for Monk. As with all of Monk's instrumental writing, her desire has been to create a base, a simple base, for the vocal parts so that they can use it as a 'jumping board.' Monk is often labeled as a minimalist as a result of her 'simple' instrumental writing which frequently follows repetitive melodic and rhythmic patterns. She claims that her work is far from minimal because of the complexity of the vocal parts. In interviews her answer is always the same, that minimalism does not describe her works; the term is a shallow attempt to define what she does. It really depends on how one views the form of her pieces. Her instrumental writing and sometimes the vocal writing could be said to be minimalistic. The instrumental lines in her work have always acted as a foundation for the complexity of her vocal lines. Monk's music can be decidedly simple and the 'lack' of musical complexity has often been criticized in reviews and articles. David Sterrit comments: "Utmost simplicity became a radical route toward renewing the emotions in music--trying to reach the nerves and feelings before the intellect, even when this meant throwing off academic complexity along with academic dullness. Fortunately, her classical training and her own sensitivity ensure that intellect is never absent, even when emotion seems dominant. And her effects always tilt toward maximalism even when she is busily paring down musical elements to their essentials." (D. Jowitt, p.110-111). Another classification that Monk feels does not describe her is that of the *avant-garde performance artist*: "That term bothers me...it's a term that makes me think of the 20s, when people could actually be *shocked* about something. I'm interested in working with things that have always existed, things that we've forgotten about..." (J. Milward, "Travels with her Art," *Applause* (June 1991), p.20). Monk tries, therefore, to be as accessible as possible while also challenging her listeners. 'Avant-garde' for her implies a certain alienation, something that she steers away from to a large degree. As a result of her desire to be both accessible and challenging to her audience at the same time, Monk will go to almost any length, using almost any combination

say the attitude of another person; the voice able to express the 'full spectrum of emotion' the vocal landscape, layered, surprising, beautiful, harsh, delicate, vocal nature; and most importantly the voice as a 'language' in itself without words. It is important to note, as was discussed earlier, that she does not mean language with semiotic meaning.

The mission statement also laid a good, solid foundation for her work. But it is the last statement in which Monk's work with the voice really plays a part: an art that reaches toward emotion we have no words for. Monk has very literally taken the voice and developed her compositional style and vocal ability to be able to express the inexpressible through *gestus* in the voice.

She has also developed a style of composition that supports her focus on the voice. The way in which she composes, and the way she thinks about music are central to the use of gesture in her works.[63]

COMPOSITION

When she first arrived in New York, it was the atmosphere of experimentation that affirmed her belief that she would be able to find new forms and structures 'between the cracks of conventional art forms.'[64] But finding new forms and

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of dance, theatre, music to achieve the right effect. Even so, her work often demands too much for it to be mainstream, labeling itself by default as 'avant-garde.'

[63] Scores do exist for a few of Monk's works although the fact that her works are always being worked on does mean that scores are often inaccurate. Most of the works are only archived by recordings and videotapes. A rare exception is the score to *ATLAS*. Monk knew she needed to produce a score for this work because of the number of instrumentalists and singers involved, but even so the recording and performances were not absolute representations of the score. In spite of this, Monk's works are not subject to chance. But the only real way Monk's works can be transferred to other people is via aural teaching so that not only the form and vocal techniques, but also the *gestus* of the piece can be taught as well. As Monk says 'I don't think that you can completely capture the essence or the principles of my music on paper.' One might ask if scores can ever capture the essence or principles of a piece of music - Monk is not the exception here. The difference is that on most other scores one can read a C# with a dynamic marking and play it correctly while in Monk's works one might see a C# and the duration of the pitch, but have no sense of the sound required or, for that matter, the *gestus* of the piece which is perhaps the most important aspect of the work. She could perhaps write out the *gestus* of a piece on the score.

[64] M. Monk, "Still the Place to Take a Chance," *The New York Times* (Oct 31, 1994).

structures for Monk meant starting at zero with each new composition. Having developed her compositional style over decades, it is often a difficult, even painful, process for her to start afresh and get 'rid of the baggage:'

> To me, the most important thing is to balance this natural refinement with a kind of daring, the willingness to fall on my face, to be vulnerable both as a person and as a performer. I think the readiness to pull the rug out from under oneself is something that can be shared with an audience. In a sense they become part of the process which they instinctively feel." [65]

She has to go through the process of 'undoing' herself, as it were, to find areas of interest she feels she has yet to explore.

Even so, it is Monk's musical sense that has always been the unifying factor in her works and she says that: '...even when I use images I'm an orchestrator.'[66] She is first and foremost a composer. As a result of this her works tend to be musically organized. While elements of character, plots and subplots, development and climax are all present:

> ...they are kept in a state of flux: a metamorphic ordering of segmental parts that shift focus, disassemble and reassemble, spreading out in a multidimensional, musically organized tableau.'[67]

When Monk writes music, she calls on a wide range of resources: physical, intuitive, intellectual and technical. Her training as a dancer and choreographer have given her a 'special sense for deep spatial organization,'[68] something that is evident in her music. Melodic lines, silence, rhythms all have an incredible space around them in the way that, for example, a rhythm will be expanded throughout a piece becoming more and more complex as time progresses. In the end there might be multiple polyrhythms occurring at the same time, but all working around one underlying, perpetual pulse. Often the pulse is only

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[65] M. Monk, "Ages of the Avant-Garde," *Performing Arts Journal* Vol.XVI, No.1 (Jan 1994), p.14.
[66] D. Jowitt, p.106.
[67] D. Jowitt, p.44-45.
[68] S. Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, p.160

recognisable through the visual movement happening at the same time – a good example of this is *Yin Nin Na* from the last act of *ATLAS*. The first phrase: *Yin nin na, yin nin na naya naya, yin nin na, na, na, na, na, na, na* is sung as a canon which is picked up by the next person in line after the first *Yin nin*. The time signature is 11/8 and so the accented beats are scattered in a tremendously complicated way if you have a large group singing together. The only way to keep the pulse is to move, up and down or side to side. The rhythm changes half way through which further complicates matters!

The form in Monk's pieces varies a great deal, but she has occasionally incorporated variations of traditional structures into her works. For example she began calling her larger theatre works 'operas' in 1971. She says: 'I'm a fan of the *idea* of opera, but not the way it has been done.'[69] So often we expect form in theatre and music; a climax, a narrative, a logical order of events governed by time, yet Monk says she is much more interested in creating work that is closer to the way the mind works. Frequently, her works will consist of a conglomeration of images, usually with a narrative strand holding them together.[70] This is all part of her goal of pulling the audience in while still leaving room for them to fit the pieces together. She presents her sonic and visual tiles as a mosaic and we, the receivers, must complete the form.

Monk says she rarely leaves anything to improvisation (much as people would like to believe, which frustrates her immensely[71]), but rather builds her pieces like an architect with sound and rhythm as her building blocks:

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[69] M. Monk in W. Albright "Tibetan Monk," *American Theatre* (May 1991), p.35.
[70] The narrative strand I mention here is usually not recognisable until the end of the work once one has seen ALL of the 'tiles' together. It is not usually something that can be followed and is therefore 'anti-narrative.' *ATLAS*, the opera, is an exception in this case – the narrative is easy to follow throughout the work.
[71] M. Monk, Interview with the author, May 2, 2002.

> I usually spend a long period alone to start with, then do some group work, work alone again, back with the group and then finally alone again.[72]

In a fascinating interview with Eleonora Beck in the *Women of Note Quarterly*[73] Monk revealed a little more about her process of composition when Beck asked her if the visual images in her works form part of the conception of her work:

> The compositional process starts with actual musical material: chords, textures, bass lines, rhythms. Then at a certain point...sometimes a picture materializes from what I have worked on musically. I weave this into the conception of the composition. So, I am not reproducing an image in music, but gradually associating an image with the music I compose. In that sense, I do not consider my music programmatic at all.[74]

This is an extremely important point to consider. Monk's works, full of images, colours and movement, are rooted in music so that out of a musical idea, a melody, a rhythm or vocal sound comes the image or movement to express it more fully. Saying this, Monk's music is very visual in itself, something she can experiment with in a concert setting leaving room for the audience to form their own images.

THE VOICE

It is not surprising that Monk's path has mostly been a vocal one, 'I loved to sing--I mean, it's the thing I love most in life!'[75] She explains that she has '...always thought of the voice as a *maximal* kind of instrument.'[76] It is maximal in the way in which she uses it to express as much as she can, maximal in the way in which the voice captures *gestus*.

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[72] M. Monk, Interview with the author, May 2, 2002.
[73] E. Beck, "Landscape Memories: An Interview with Meredith Monk," *Women of Note Quarterly* (August 1996), p.20.
[74] Ibid., p.20
[75] D. Jowitt, p.133-156.
[76] J. Corbett, "An Interview with Meredith Monk: The Instrumental Voice," *New Art Examiner* (Summer 1993), p.27.

When Monk first started working on the voice, she says she 'thought a lot about singing as invocation and evocation...I wanted to deal with the whole human being.'[77] When asked once how to describe her vocal style Monk replied:

> It's visceral, kinetic vocal music that basically deals with the breath and the voice, and all the different possibilities and transformational power that the voice can have.[78]

This transformational power was expressed first in 'Notes on the Voice: 'The dancing voice. The voice as flexible as the spine.'[79] And it was her background in dance that led her to work with her voice as she did with her body in movement. She came to realize that the voice and body form parts of a single expressive instrument, a whole. David Sterrit notes:

> She treats voices as if they were solid bodies and takes a choreographer's pleasure in manipulating them toward predetermined, but flexible goals. Even when a work is finished, some sections may call on the performers to play with their own ideas and interpretations, inside a carefully defined framework.[80]

Although Sterrit is not referring to gesture in the voice here, the voice as a solid body is really the same concept. What he notices in Monk's work is her ability to *choreograph* the voice giving it movement. The allusion to choreography also describes the flexible form in her works. The simile of the 'solid body' is an exciting one and describes the voice as something firm, substantial in itself, powerful, three-dimensional and able to communicate more than words. It was her lessons in Eurhythmics that, more or less, led her to this realization:

> Looking back to those lessons...I realize that Eurhythmics...introduced me to a principle that I have used throughout my working life as a composer and performer: the inseparability of music and movement, the voice and the body.[81]

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[77] D. Jowitt, p.79.
[78] R. Tuttle, p.3.
[79] D. Jowitt, p.56.
[80] D. Jowitt, p.107
[81] M. Monk, "Still the Place to Take a Chance," *The New York Times* (Oct 31, 1999).

Emile Jaques-Dalcroze's influence on Monk's work has never been discussed in any depth, yet it is one of the most important influences. Recalling the training she received under the Polish sisters Mita and Lola Rohm at Steinway Hall in New York, she remembers improvising to music, throwing balls in precise time and exercises dealing with music in relation to parts of the body. She was also taught solfege[82] by the sisters as part of this training, but it was not taught in the way we are accustomed to in our conservatories. It was all done physically. Monk described the method:

> It's done physically, so the low *do* is down here and high *do* is up here...you move you arms incrementally from down to up as you are singing the scale and at the same time you can read the notes on the blackboard. So you are getting sound, space and sensation simultaneously.[83]

Jaques-Dalcroze's classes would also have involved exercises like the following:

> ...girls would be taught to walk to the 2/4 beat of a piece of music while gesticulating with one arm to a 3/4 beat and with the other to a 4/4 beat.[84]

The point of the classes was to enable students to internalize and thus be able to perform rhythms through their body rather than trying to learn them abstractly. After some training, students were able to walk, sway and move their arms to complex polyrhythmic music.

Two men influenced Jaques-Dalcroze's philosophy of teaching: Mathis Lussy and Eugene Ysaye. It is important to mention them because they too shed light on Monk's poetics. Lussy spent a great deal of time analyzing rhythm and it was these studies that influenced Jaques-Dalcroze. He said that Lussy's studies of 'agogic nuances, accelerando, ritenuto, ritartando...opened doors upon the

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[82] Jaques-Dalcroze's new methods of teaching, which eventually broadened out into Eurhythmics, began with solfege.
[83] M. Monk, Interview with Frank J. Oteri, www.newmusicbox.com.
[84] Albright, p.101.

knowledge of the relations between the body, spirit and the musical emotions.'[85] So here we see the connection between Jaques-Dalcroze's theories and Monk's. Ysaye was a violinist from Belgium and Jaques-Dalcroze worked for him as an accompanist. Ysaye was a performer in whom one could see the 'living music' as well as hear it.

Ysaye's basic assertion was that music flowed through the body as an outward sign of the brain's interpretation of music: its dynamics, rhythms and nuances. This certainly confirmed the ideas that Jaques-Dalcroze was formulating in regards to the development of Eurhythmics and which took effect in his teaching at the time. He believed that if you trained your muscles to perfectly respond to music, you would heighten the efficiency of your brain, freeing yourself to express the spiritual essence of music.

Jaques-Dalcroze was convinced that there was a direct relationship between bodily movement and rhythm and that this relationship might be the key to musicianship. [86] He noticed that the predominant weakness in his students was the inability to move musically and so he went on to develop a programme of full interpretation of music through bodily movement which he originally called *plastique animée* or living plastic:

> Jaques-Dalcroze thought that living plastic could, in the absence of sound, manifest every attribute of music: he dreamed of a "a scale of gestures: exactly comparable to the diatonic scale, and thought that the lines traced in space by the twirling or running body could be described as legato or staccato. We limit music, Jaques-Dalcroze believed, by conceiving it as a merely acoustic phenomenon: "Every man should have *music within himself.* I mean what the Greeks called music, *i.e.* the totality of our sensory and psychic faculties."[87]

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[85] L. K. Revkin, *An Historical and Philosophical Inquiry into the Development of Jaques-Dalcroze Eurhythmics and its Influence on Music Education in the French Cantons of Switzerland* (Ph.D dissertation, Northwestern University, 1984), p.144.
[86] Revkin p.160
[87] Albright, p.102.

These are words that one can imagine Monk saying. Albright notes that Brecht and Weill have an alphabet of bodily gesture to express the *gestus*. Monk almost has an equivalent alphabet of vocal gestures which she expresses through extended vocal techniques. Once, for example, Monk used the technique of hocketing to express the interdependence between two people. In *Facing North*, Monk and Robert Een sing a long section of hocket in which they are entirely dependent on one another to stay focused and in time - interdependent.

Jaques-Dalcroze also felt that singing was an important part of his programme and he created exercises to develop suppleness in the neck, shoulders and head while singing. His philosophy, as Revkin writes:

> ...was based on the fact that of the three elements of music: Sound, Rhythm and Dynamics--Rhythm and Dynamics have their counterpart in our muscular system...[Jaques-Dalcroze] based his system on music because music is an important psychic force springing from the emotional and spiritual centers which by its power of stimulation and control is able to influence all our vital activities.[88]

He believed that unless his students were able to move to music, they would not understand it. Essentially Jaques-Dalcroze's discoveries led him to a fundamental philosophy: 'that rhythm both embodies the spiritual and spiritualizes the body.'[89] However, the main difference between Jaques-Dalcroze and Monk is that the Jaques-Dalcroze movements 'offered a system for the direct translation of musical rhythm into physical gesture.'[90] Monk has never been concerned with the *direct* translation of her vocal lines or music into physical gesture. Her choreography is much freer than this, allowing for the physical gestures to add even more meaning to vocal gestures.

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[88] Revkin p.182
[89] I. Partsch-Bergsohn, *Modern Dance in Germany and the United States: Crosscurrents and Influences* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994), p.6.
[90] Albright, p.105.

So, through her training in Eurhythmics and subsequent training in voice[91] and dance, Monk saw that the voice was tightly bound to the body and that they were inseparable. Eurhythmics supported her ideas about gesture, she took this a step further and came to the point of containing the body in the voice through her use of extended vocal techniques and willingness to do away with prescribed forms for the singing voice. When I say 'contain the body in the voice' I mean the way in which Monk transfers what might be expressed in a physical gesture into an auditory gesture. Her decision not to use text, rather than limiting her work, opens up more possibilities for the voice. She uses phonemes or syllables with no specific meaning except the emotional content expressed through them:

> Words point to a particular meaning. I like image or gesture that's evocative but which is more poetry of the senses. I'm trying to bypass discursive thought, which is verbal. I'm trying to get to an essential communication.[92]

It is Monk's belief in a universal art that explains some of her reasons for not using text in her works:

> I would say that the reason I don't use a lot of text in my work, is because I like to think that the sound and the movement reaches directly to the heart and the emotions and that language sometimes becomes a barrier and becomes very specific...the voice and body speak very eloquently and they can transfer to people of other cultures.

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[91] Monk's vocal training has mostly been on her own at the piano although she also took voice lessons during school and college. It has been pointed out that she could well have enjoyed a successful career as a classical singer. (J. Rockwell, *The New York Times*, (March 28, 1976)) Monk deliberately moved away from the Western Classical tradition in singing because it is so much to do with 'standing and planting yourself,' (MM in interview with Frank J. Oteri). The strong relationship between the voice and the body seems like common sense. As Monk says: "There is a relationship between the vitality of the voice and the freedom of the body, not having to necessarily jump around in space but working with the unfettered use of the whole body. I like to call it the dancing voice and the singing body." (MM in interview with Frank J. Oteri). When Monk works on the voice she still uses the same technical principles as classical singers, supporting the voice with the whole body, but she differs in that she uses different 'resonators.' Monk has often found when working with classically trained performers, that they have a great deal of difficulty moving beyond what they have been taught.

[92] D. P. Stearns, "Meredith Monk," *BBC Music Magazine*, (May 1996).

In the same vein, her interest in universalizing her work is evident in her style of composing as she says: 'I try to get to the fundamentals of life.' She sees herself working in a similar way to an archaeologist discovering the archaeology of the voice and layers of human expression: 'I've always been interested in basic human utterance as the ground base of what I'm working on vocally.'[93] Working with 'basic human utterance' has led Monk to constantly face and confront basic, yet intense, human emotions. She sees text as an additional layer to vocal music that takes away from the meaning expressed through the voice alone:

> The voice itself is a very eloquent language that can uncover shades of feelings that we don't have words for. I'm really trying for a more primordial, direct utterance.... I have a lot of respect for language and I think language gets lost in opera; I'd rather use words as another layer that has its own integrity. I'm working to find exact phonemes that are expressive of a certain texture or timbre and expressive of an emotional state. Any audience anywhere in the world can understand what is going on in my work.[94]

By way of vocal gesture combined with the 'essential communication' of the soul, Monk condenses the narrative into the voice. Perhaps she believes that we can only truthfully communicate via our unspoken thought processes which she expresses through the *gestus* of a work. Therefore, the narrative in her works is not simply what we see in front of us as a story, but rather what we do not see – the underlying, unspoken world of the heart.

One other not so obvious comparison has been made between Monk and Antonin Artaud, not so much as an influence on her work, but as a comparison

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[93] M. Monk, Interview with Deborah Jowitt, 92nd Street Y, New York. date
[94] I. Brooks, "Meredith Monk: Dancing in Tongues," *JAZZIZ* (Aug-Sep 1994), p.76

of theatrical similarities.[95] Sally Banes associated Monk with an Artaud quote in her book *Terpsichore in Sneakers.* The quote is taken from one of Artaud's essays "Manifesto for a Theater that Failed:"

> There will not be a single theatrical gesture that will not carry behind it all the fatality of life and the mysterious encounters of dreams.[96]

One can immediately see why Banes used the quote to describe Monk and it is an exceptionally interesting comparison because of Artaud's ideas about *language* and *gesture.*

Artaud's theater is a psychoanalytical theater that is based on Freud's notion that the malaise of modern society is due to the repression of our instinctive, unconscious, archetypal drives. In Artaud's infamous 'Theater of Cruelty,' he seeks to allow us to establish contact with the dark forces within us, submit to them and ultimately conquer them. His hope was that his theater would awaken his audience to the dark powers within so that we could all ultimately transcend to a collective consciousness. His theater aimed to explore one's inner states, so that the evil and terror that is repressed in the unconscious can then be relieved. He aimed to achieve 'purgation' through the senses, through a physical experience (watching his explicit, nauseating, 'cruel' plays).[97]

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[95] Perhaps Mark Berger in his book *A Metamorphic Theater* makes a more accurate comparison of Monk with Artaud. Monk's works can also be understood in terms of the development of the Happenings in the 1950s and 1960s. Ultimately concerned with extending the boundaries of theatre, those involved with the Happenings began to realize one of Artaud's aims in his theater: to create a theatrical space in which all forms of art could be combined into a new theatrical experience (not his ultimate aim, but this served as a foundation for the Theater of Cruelty/Manipulation). Berger writes that 'the unique quality and strength of Meredith Monk's theatre derive from her ability to explore and expand upon this aspect of nonverbal collage theater within a narrative format.' (*A Metamorphic Theater,* p.44-45)

[96] A. Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings,* ed. S. Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p.160.

[97] A. Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theater,* ed. G.A. Plunka New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1994), p.21-27

Although Artaud did seek, through his art, to reach the very depths of our souls, the emphasis of the Theatre of Cruelty is on the physical and psychic transformation of the spectator and not on the spiritual. Monk, however, believes in the healing power of art and the need for healing in our society today and her belief is that her art will help to achieve this. Artaud takes his audience on a cleansing ritual, but cleansing of a deep nature through shock, so deep that if achieved it verges on cruelty.

Monk, in her cornerstone statement, and Artaud speak of the need to learn to be mystics again. Both are committed to reaching spectators as deeply as possible. However, the following comment from Artaud reflects how the depth he is reaching for differs radically from Monk:

> If we were not convinced that we would reach him as deeply as possible, we would consider ourselves inadequate to our most absolute duty. He [the spectator] must be totally convinced that we are capable of making him scream.[98]

Yet despite this difference, Artaud's thoughts about language and the body are very similar to Monk's poetics regarding the voice. He lauded the value of nonverbal language as intuitive communication (much in the same way as Monk does), unlike words which must be deciphered by the mind. Artaud realized that the physical language of gestures could communicate through the body, whereas words fail to do so. Artaud and Monk came to the same conclusion regarding words: that there are "attitudes in the realms of thought and intelligence that words are incapable of grasping and that gestures and everything partaking of a spatial language attain more precision than they."[99]

Once Artaud had realised this, he worked to contain meaning in a spatial language, using physical gesture instead of words. Monk works to contain

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[98] A. Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, p.157.

attitudes in the voice using the voice instead of the body. Recall Artaud's statement used by Banes to describe Monk:

> There will not be a single theatrical gesture that will not carry behind it all the fatality of life and the mysterious encounters of dreams.[100]

In many ways, this quote very accurately reflects Monk's artistic vision: 'An art that cleanses the senses, that offers insight, feeling, magic.'[101] Compare this to another statement made by Artaud: 'We conceive of the theater as an authentic performance of magic.'[102] Monk and Artaud created their magic through 'connection' as Signe Hammer describes below:

> The greatest theater has been produced when there has been maximum connection; when the private, internal experience and the public, external experience cross at many points...Monk understands the interplay between internal and external reality...she is unafraid to deal with feeling...she has been using the theatrical vocabulary she helped create to explore connection rather than disconnection.[103]

And there is Monk's forte. Where public and private experience cross we find the locus of the *gestus*.

6. ENDINGS

Gestus contains gesture, and it is the wider notion, but it also informs the receiver of another level of meaning; the bearing, mien or attitude of the performer. It was intended by Brecht and Weill to be used to articulate meaningful social statements.

Meredith Monk has adapted the concept of gesture in such a way that the voice alone can express physical gesture, the 'immediate' narrative of a work, the

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[99] A. Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theater*, p.27
[100] A. Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, p.160
[101] D. Jowitt, p.17
[102] A. Artaud, in *Antonin Artaud: Selected Writings*, p.161
[103] S. Hammer, "Against Alienation: A Post-Linear Theatre Struggles to Connect," *The Village Voice* (Dec 20, 1976)- 65-66.

underlying narrative of the emotional life and make social statements. This is the *gestus* in her work. In *ATLAS*, Monk used subtle intervallic changes in vocal phrases, a change in the tone of a voice, a variation of a musical theme or a change in vocal technique to express meaning, to express the *gestus*. She transforms physical gesture into audible gesture. She uses *gestus* and gesture primarily to express hidden personal and social agendas and emotions. Monk's work with the voice has emerged from a life of dance. Her use of gesture in the voice is explicable only through knowledge of her background in movement and physical gesture. I have shown that her use of gesture in the voice derives from lessons in Jaques-Dalcroze Eurhythmics and has a clear analogue in Antonin Artaud's work in the theatre.

She often talks about creating a universal 'language' or about expressing 'emotions for which we have no words.' Through her vocal lines she imitates the rhetoric of speech, but does not create language with semiotic meaning. Her language is the language of the heart. Incommunicable thoughts and feelings can be articulated and revealed, made manifest through the *gestus* of a work. Monk has sometimes called her work with the voice the 'kinetic impulse of singing,'[104] which relates it to motion and enables her to capture gesture. She says that she wants to find exact phonemes that are expressive of a certain texture or timbre and expressive of an emotional state. As Albright said regarding gestic music:

> The composer strives to create a pattern of sound that specifies a precise bodily movement, a precise inflection of speech.[105]

Monk has not talked about *gestus* before. She comments on *gesture* in her work, but only in a purely physical sense. In the interview for this thesis, her answer to

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[104] M. Monk, Interview with the author, May 2, 2002.

the question of whether she recognized the gesture in her vocal work was enthusiastic: 'You've got it girl!'[106] Gesture and *gestus* are essential elements in her work and there are a number of reasons why it is there.

Firstly, Monk's works are musically organized and as she has said herself, even the images she uses are arranged rhythmically and musically. She has repeatedly said that music and specifically the voice are the essence of her work. As a result of this, all of the visual strands she uses (film, dance, theatre) *must* derive their meaning, in part, from the voice. It is through the voice, but more specifically the *gestus* in the voice that she expresses the fundamental meaning in her work:

> ...you get the purest form of a person's expression in a solo and I would say the same thing is true for the concerts I do with the ensemble. [107]

One might say then that because she believes the purest form of her expression is in a concert of music then *gestus* is the purest form of expression.

Secondly, Monk's rehearsal methods imply that she cultivates the notion of *gestus* with her performers. She requires time and commitment from her performers because the *gestus* in each work needs to be fully understood before it can be expressed to an audience. In *ATLAS*, for example, she asked each performer to learn every part in the opera. This encouraged a strong connection between the performers, but also between scenes. Each person knew the opera intimately and could respond through their own scenes to the *gestus* of the entire work. As Wong said, this made the opera into a more 'organic whole' because the overall *gestus* made sense.[108]

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[105] Albright, p.112
[106] M. Monk, Interview with the author, May 2, 2002.
[107] R. Tuttle, *Women of Note Quarterly*, p.4.
[108] R. Wong, Interview with the author, via email.

Thirdly, the themes in Monk's work point toward the use of *gestus*. In most of her work, she makes strong statements: political, social, feminist, spiritual, familial, about relationships and about working as an artist. *Gestus* is the perfect tool for doing this. In *ATLAS*, for example, the overall *gestus* is the quest and longing: spiritual quest, life quest, the search for peace and transcendence from this life. It is also autobiographical. Another prominent theme is Monk's desire to express things that are not necessarily there, things with which we rarely connect or notice, namely our subconscious. In this case, her music has to convey more than just the apparent narrative, it must express something much deeper: the *gestus* in the voice. The fact that she uses scores so infrequently also implies that she cultivates *gestus* because she teaches her works aurally. *Gestus* cannot really be written down or recorded.

Much as being a composer before a musicologist brings a special attitude to one's research, Monk's work as a choreographer and dancer expands her use of *gestus* and gesture in the voice because of its origin in physical gesture. In 'Notes on the Voice,' Monk's revelation was based on the fact that she saw the voice as flexible as the body, capable of making physical gesture into auditory gesture. It was her work with the body and specifically with Eurhythmics that led her to this revelation.

Gestus has also enabled Monk to remain open to the spiritual influences in her life and work. The body and the voice are one and in the same way, Monk also regards the spirit and body as one whole:

> I don't separate the body from the spirit. I think that synchronizing body and mind is working on a spiritual path...it means a kind of alertness and awareness. It's not separate.[109]

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[109] R. Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.184.

Gesture and *gestus* in the voice have enabled Monk to express her ultimate message: art as a healing force. She believes that art can provide an environment in which people can experience transformation and healing, magic, be part of a community, and 'can feel wonder, awe, the full palette of emotion.'[110] Similar to Artaud, although rooted in different ideals, Monk hopes that her work will act as a cleansing experience. Just as Artaud wished to cleanse the senses through shock, Monk wishes to access our inner depths by playing out scenes that we can relate to via the *gestus* of hidden emotions.

Monk's use of vocal gesture is unique in the canon of vocal music that incorporates extended vocal techniques, but it has its roots in dramatic experimental concepts of the early twentieth century.

[110] M. Monk, "Some Thoughts About Art," *American Theater Festival Magazine* No.1 (1991), p.9

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