

PERFORMANCE AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

Meredith Monk in conversation with Bonnie Marranca

For more than four decades Meredith Monk's work as composer, performer, director, choreographer, and filmmaker has been influential in creating the new vocabularies of contemporary performance and media. She is a pioneer in what is known as "extended vocal technique," introduced to a worldwide audience through her many concerts and CDs. In 1978 she formed Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble, featured on numerous recordings, most recently, the music theatre work *impermanence*. Monk's music has been performed by the New World Symphony, Musica Sacra, Björk, Kronos Quartet, and Bang On A Can All-Stars, and by many other musicians. Her operas and music theatre works include *mercy* (with the artist Ann Hamilton), *Atlas*, *The Politics of Quiet*, *Quarry*, *Education of the Girlchild*, and *Vessel*, an early site-specific creation. Monk's films and videos count among them *Book of Days*, *Ellis Island*, and *Our Lady of Late*. Her visual art works and installations have been exhibited at the Walker Art Center, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, the Whitney Biennial, and the Frederieke Taylor Gallery in New York City. Monk has received numerous honors, including the MacArthur Award, several Obies and Bessies, and induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She performed a Vocal Offering for the Dalai Lama at the World Festival of Sacred Music in Los Angeles in 1999. Her newest work, *Songs of Ascension*, was first performed in a concert version in March 2008 at Dartington College of Arts (England) and later in a theatre version, with video by Hamilton, at the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis). In October the work had its premier at Stanford University, in addition to the site-specific performance of *Songs of Ascension* inside Ann Hamilton's Tower, an eight-story structure on the Oliver Ranch in Geyserville, California. This conversation was recorded on August 19, 2008 in New York.



I would like to start with the significance of the title of your new work, Songs of Ascension. It has an obvious reference in terms of Judaism to The Songs of Ascent and also to Christianity, which celebrates the Ascension on Easter Sunday, forty days after the Resurrection. There are Buddhist references as well. How did you arrive at the concept of "ascension" for your work?

I think the best way I can talk about it is just to tell you a little bit about the process of how the piece began. The generative meeting was with a friend of mine, Norman Fischer, who was originally the abbot of the Zen Center of San Francisco. He was born Jewish, spent many years doing Zen practice, and now he has come back to also doing a meditation practice for Jews. So he is definitely trying to integrate these two things. We were having a conversation—this was many years ago—and he was talking about the poet Paul Celan who I had never heard of. Paul Celan referred to the Songs of Ascent. Now, I might have heard it wrong, because I thought I heard it as Songs of Ascension, but it was really Songs of Ascent. They are psalms from the 120th to the 134th. People from all around an area would come to a mountain, they would bring their best harvest, and they would recite or sing these songs going up the mountain. There were fifteen steps that went up. Apparently, at each of the steps one of these psalms was sung. Now I didn't know all of the details of it but something intrigued me, and I was thinking—isn't it interesting, first of all, that so many cultures go up to worship? Why is up better than going down? I was intrigued to know what those songs would have sounded like—and that idea of walking up and singing. I started thinking about other cultures, like the Mayan culture, the Inca culture, and in Buddhism there are stupas that you go up as well as the circumambulation aspect of going around them.

I wasn't thinking of the Christian Ascension, to be totally honest with you. But certainly the way that all the churches go upward. So in a strange way, I was thinking very sculpturally and very dimensionally of what's up and what's down, and what's around. I was contemplating that and something felt right about working on it. Then around that time Ann Hamilton, who I had just finished working with on *mercy*, said, "I'm working on this Tower up in Sonoma County, and I would love you to sing for the opening of the Tower." So that was in the back of my mind. Then I started working on a string quartet for Kronos called *Stringsongs*. Usually when I am between pieces I have a lot of different ideas. Sometimes, part of the beginnings of working on a piece are weaving together some of what would seem like disparate ideas. We went to sing at the opening of the Tower, and did repertoire from many years. I only brought five singers with me so there were no string players, and we basically did a very simple and direct piece to see what the acoustic situation was.

How did all these elements work within the Tower?

I was trying to bring together three ideas: the string quartet, Ann's Tower, and the Songs of Ascension. It seemed that with the Songs of Ascension and her Tower there was some synchronicity. I went to her and I said, "I'm working on this piece called *Songs of Ascension*, and wouldn't it be interesting to try to work with the Tower as one aspect?" I had not seen the Tower at that point, so I had no idea how difficult it would be, actually.

There is one other thing I want to tell you about the Tower. What I find very inspiring about working with it is that the inside is a double helix of stairs that go up to the top, which is open to the sky. I started getting very interested in DNA and the

helix as a structural idea. If you have not seen the Tower you might not know that in the way the piece is put together. But if you have, you actually feel this internal musical spiral weaving and threading structure, within the passages, and also within the structure of the whole thing. So that's an underlying inspiration.

Do you mean in terms of the biological?

It's more that the idea of weaving and strands and the way the DNA is a three-dimensional kind of weave. Musically, what was very interesting for me to work on was to think—how would you make a structure that was like that, where the musical phrases would connect to be a continuous spiral? But then there could be these side connections. Because if you look at DNA, there are all of these little connections that are going in a different dimension. So how would you actually make a musical form that was like that?

It is not the kind of Tower where you look out over the landscape but more like an acoustic space, isn't it?

Well, as I said the top is open so you can see the landscape all around it, if you are at the very top. The interesting thing about the double helix that Ann created is that instead of it weaving around the way that you usually see a double helix, it looks like the stairs are sometimes going in parallel, but then they start weaving in another dimension. So you could be five-feet away from someone and think that you are right next to them, but you can't get to them. The windows are more like window seats. They are like little alcoves. Sometimes we will use them to put the instruments there, and sometimes people will be in those alcoves.

Let's talk about the evolution of Songs of Ascension, starting with the first version at Dartington College of Arts, in the Great Hall of the school, in Devon, England. There it was more-or-less a concert version, performed with the lights on. The audience was on two sides and the musicians in the space at one end of the room.

It was at eleven o' clock in the morning so it was all natural light coming in the windows. I love the idea of people performing in the day. People just come in for the piece and then they go on and live the rest of their day. There is a little tiny platform, maybe six inches, and that was kind of a natural place for the instrumentalists to have their home base. We had only worked with the Elysian String Quartet for a week, so they had not memorized the material. They were reading some of the material on music stands, so it became very functional. In the more theatrical version done later at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the string players memorized all the music, and so they could move throughout the space in different ways.

One has the sense that the performers are performing for each other as much as for the audience since the musicians and singers and dancers are in the same space at times. I have the feeling that in some of your pieces there is more a sense of a community than of a cast.

That's exactly it. This piece is not really meant to be a theatre piece at all. You could say it is more like a ritual or an offering. At the Walker we have the house lights on the whole time. And I remember someone said, "Oh, you know, maybe I would have liked to have had the lights go out so we could go into that world." And I said, "You and that world are the same world." That was a conscious choice. What Ann has done visually with her videos is that she has the videos on turntables. So the video is also slowly revolving around the audience and coming across the space. In a way, what Ann has done, and what we talked about right from the beginning as a concept, is that all the other elements except for the music are really like weather. The music, the movement, and the interactions of the performers create a sense of community and the audience is immersed in the experience.

Weather is a very interesting concept. It's like the climate or the environment of the work. How else did you think about it?

It's like the sun coming in the windows. We don't have the sun coming in the windows in a theatre, and you're confronted with a black floor. At the Walker we took all the wings out. In most theatres we are going to try to do that as much as we can. We'll get it down to a totally naked space as much as possible.

How did you change the piece from the more concert-like version in full light in England, which didn't have any of Ann Hamilton's elements yet, to the theatrical version in the U.S., which also included her video?

Well, we had talked about working together on this even before Dartington. We were scratching our heads thinking, what are we going to do in the theatre? How are we going to animate a theatre and get away from a pictorial, frontal kind of orientation that a theatre necessarily has. For a while I was concerned about the particular images that Ann was going to use, and how they worked in terms of content. What ended up happening was that she realized that in a way the content of the images—and I realized this too—the particular content (the horse, the bird, for example), was not very important. Ann chose old black and white found footage, which she thought would work visually; I thought that was a better way to go. I originally thought, well, you know, the horse should be in this section, and this should be in that section, and we didn't really technically have control over those turntables. It depended on when, for example, you started those turntables and when the audience came in. And so I remember that at a certain point I finally realized: just let go of all this. It is like an installation piece. It should just have its own reality.

You talked a little bit about how video affected your process. But what does it bring to the piece?

I think it brings this piece a constancy of cycles because you are literally seeing these images circle around. It animates the space itself so that I don't have to have people moving around all the time to have a sense of movement. It allows you to rest. This is the weather that is going on, and you can rest in that. Then you can really listen to the music.

Weather is really an atmosphere then.

Atmosphere, but it also suggests recurrence. The videos create a sense of space and a different time cycle in counterpoint to the music.

*Since you also collaborated with Ann in *mercy* what were the kinds of lessons that you learned in terms of working together? What did you bring to the new piece from the experience of *mercy*?*

I think of this piece as a different process than *mercy*, because in *mercy* we started working together conceptually right from the very beginning. This time, I spent a lot more time making the piece without her input. I mean, we'd talk on the phone from time to time and we'd meet. But it did not have that sense of the two of us really starting from the same place. In a way, it necessitated independent contributions. For me, letting go enough, surrendering enough, to actually realize that sense of another independent layer having its own integrity, as my musical structure has its own integrity, is interesting. I usually don't work like that.

It sounds more like the Cage/Cunningham model of autonomous languages that nevertheless work together in an organic way.

I feel as though the form is very organic, the structure is very organic. My process of making my material was very organic within itself. And then I have to trust that that other element is going to also have its own integrity. Yet, at the same time, it is actually like thinking of counterpoint; a visual, temporal counterpoint. What is very interesting to me about this process and working on *Songs of Ascension* is that it reminds me a lot of some of my older work, like the process of making *Education of the Girlchild* or *Juice*. It's a modular way of working where the components can shift or change in every situation. And so for me it is very exciting to go back to that way of thinking. It's like a vocabulary that can shift in different spaces. For example, performing the piece in the Tower will have to be a whole different structure, because there are some things that we can't do in there.

So there will be three versions of the same piece.

Three, and maybe even more.

You spoke earlier about the cyclical nature. How would you describe your notion of time? There doesn't seem to be any historical time in this work.

No. The piece is quite abstract. It really has a primordial sense of time: seasons changing for example, and different speeds of change. Time circling around, cycles of different speeds and dimensions.

I'm interested in how a work that has liturgical or spiritual connotations, in terms of ascension, manifests itself in the meter of a musical composition.

Wow.

On a purely technical level, how do you treat the voice and movement and image in space to achieve a kind of luminosity?

Songs of Ascension is music driven, but I think of the whole thing as a composition: how to weave together or distill the perceptual elements. Does gesture take away or add to the music, for example? This is one of my fundamental questions. On a spatial level, I would never be limited by something like having to ascend all the time. There is a lot of downward movement in the piece as well and circumambulation. It is more of a sculptural idea of up and down. I was curious about why in ancient forms of worship the impulse was to always go up. Why didn't the participants go down into the ground?

*As a matter of fact, what is interesting to me is that at the end the performers are rooted to the earth because there is the unusual image of the musicians lying down with their instruments on top of their bodies. Whereas, if you think of an earlier work, like *Atlas*, the performers are clearly going up a ladder. *Songs of Ascension* is a different kind of resolution. It's not quite there in that idealistic realm but more earthbound and unresolved.*

There's another layer. I don't think it's very explicit, and I am not sure how to work with it, but when I was beginning this piece I was contemplating how to reflect my ongoing interest in ecology. I had just finished reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The image that I have at the end when I am singing, crouched down with the shruti, is that I feel like I am this ancient, three-hundred-year-old woman actually boring down into the ground. It is this idea of a memory of the Earth—like the Earth is finished. It has that kind of sadness of, you know, oh yeah there were geese, and oh yeah, there was an Earth.

*Yet, none of the versions of your piece have the sense of a catastrophic imagination, or what I would call the post-cultural imagination of *The Road*.*

No, no, no, that's very specific. Some of my earlier work, like *The Games*, had much more of that, and *Turtle Dreams Cabaret*. But in *Songs of Ascension*, there is a pull between the absolute and the particular. There is not just sky, there is also earth: earth, sky, and human.

You know what struck me . . . I don't know if you have this feeling but it seems to me the shruti is like a book.

Oh, I never thought of that.

When the piece opens, there are three of them on the floor. So, they're like another element of your work where objects seem to have their own life.

Exactly.





(Facing page) Top: Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble with the Elysian Quartet in *Songs of Ascension* workshop in the Great Hall at Dartington College of Arts, March 2008. Bottom: Musician lying on floor with cello.

Photos: Ben Stein. Courtesy The House Foundation.

(This page) Meredith Monk with musicians and singers.
Photo: Olivia Georgia. Courtesy The House Foundation.

excerpt from "Falling"
Songs of Ascension

meredith monk

The image shows a handwritten musical score for an excerpt from the "Falling" section of Meredith Monk's *Songs of Ascension*. The score is organized into two systems of staves. The first system includes staves for Voice 1 (AS), Voice 2 (BR), Voice 3 (EF), Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The second system includes staves for Voice 4 (AS), Voice 5 (BR), Voice 6 (EF), Voice 7 (MM), Voice 8 (K-G), Voice 9 (C-G), Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and includes performance markings such as "ee", "cc", and "A".

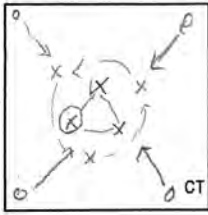
Meredith Monk score from "Falling" section of *Songs of Ascension*.
Photo: Courtesy Meredith Monk.

preset - chorus waves + JH at large?

① Meredith

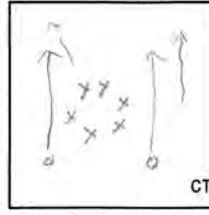
Songs Of Ascension Lighting Q Sheet

⊕



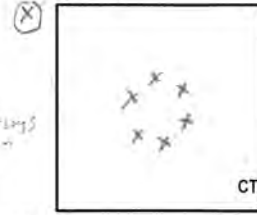
1) Q Sruhi

⊗

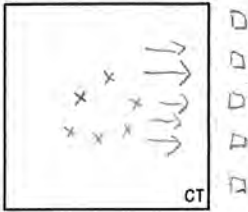


Q sruhi

⊗ o o o

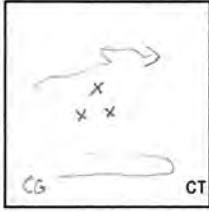


2) Q strand 1



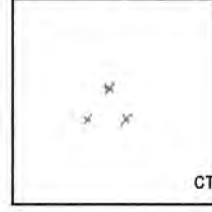
Q strand 1

⊗ o o o sitting? stand?



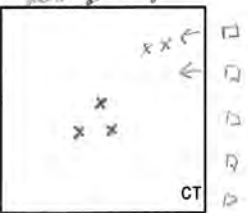
3) Winter

⊗ o o o stand up sit down?

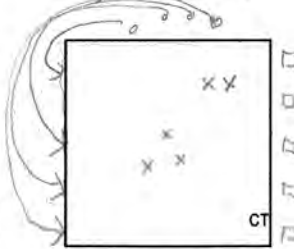


Q Fast song

JH enter? energy? o o o



Q 5) vocal call + perc. solo

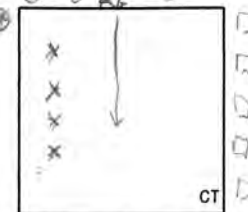


Q 6) duet + summer

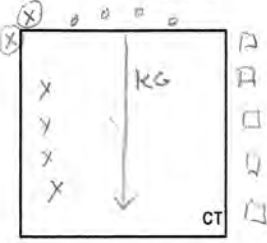


Q summer

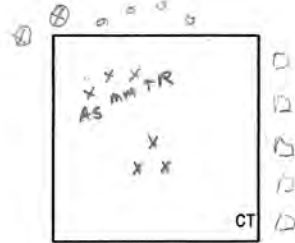
JH enter? 1st time



Q 7) Mekie's melody



Q Mekie's melody



Q 8) TTIO

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Ground plan by Monk for the Walker Art Center performance of *Songs of Ascension*. Photo: Courtesy Meredith Monk.



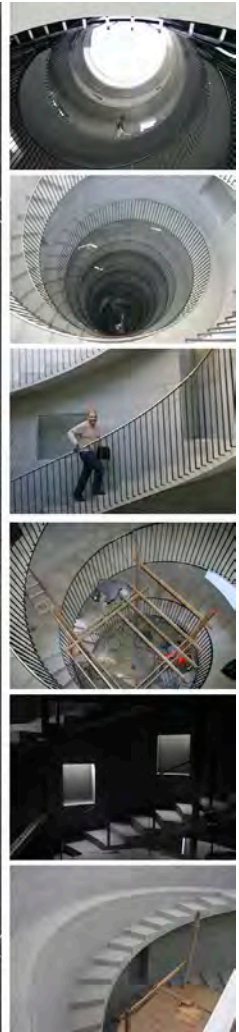
Scenes from *Songs of Ascension* at the Walker Art Center, June 2008. Top (clockwise from left): Bohdan Hilash, Meredith Monk, Ellen Fisher, Ching Gonzalez, Allison Sniffin. Video by Ann Hamilton. Bottom: Meredith Monk with shruti. Photos: Cameron Wittig. Courtesy Walker Art Center.



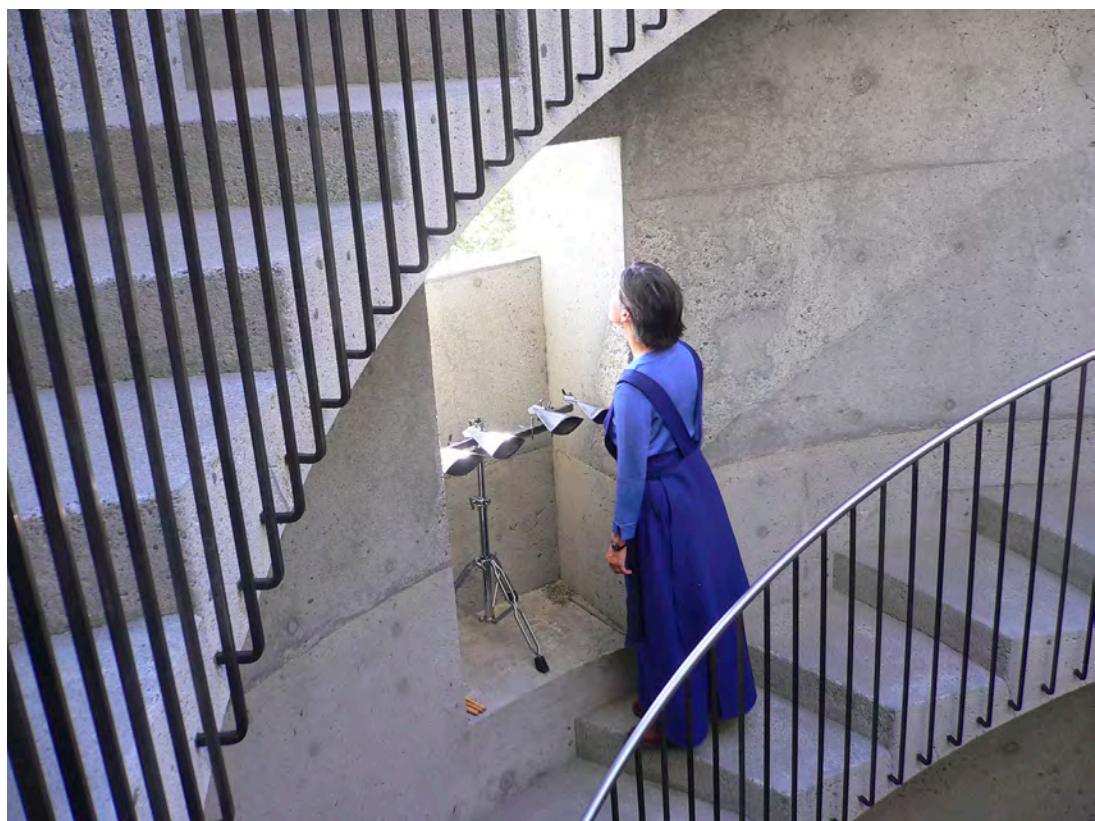
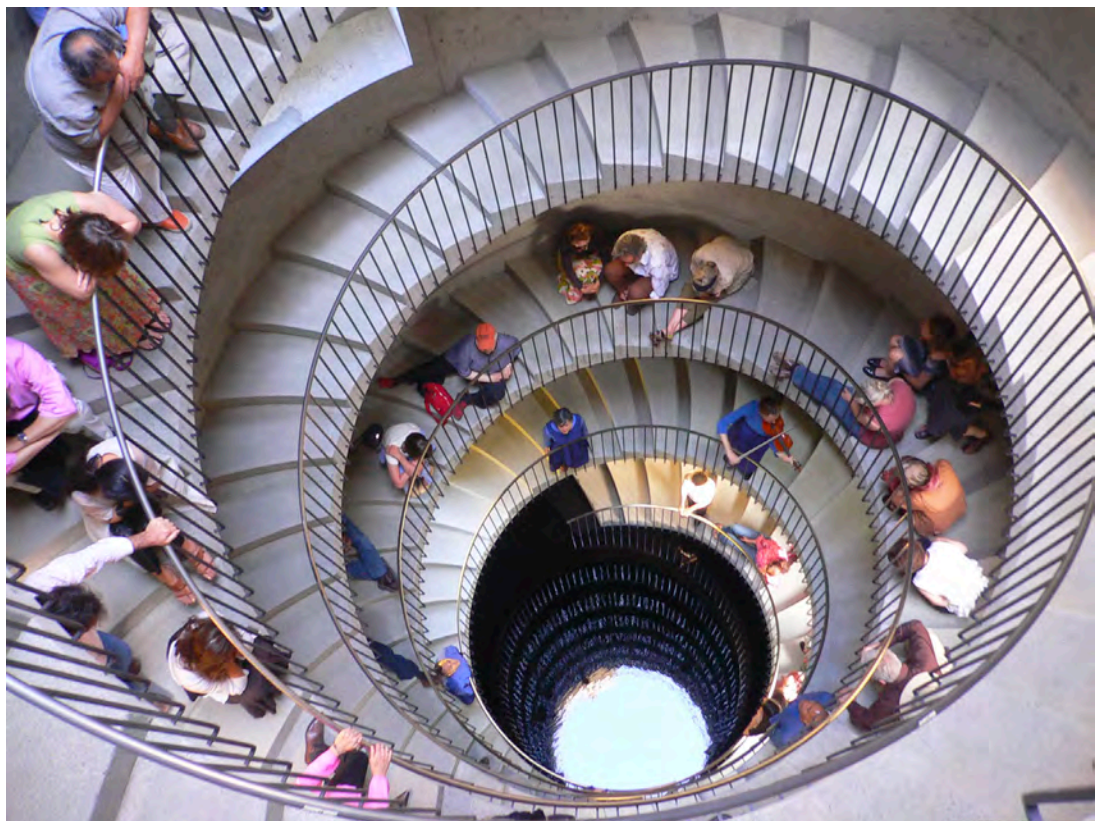


A view of Ann Hamilton's eight-story cement Tower on the Oliver Ranch in Geyserville, California. Photo: Lynne Hayes/ Courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.

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(This page) Composite view of Tower. (Facing page) Top: View of audience and performers at the May 2008 opening of the Tower. Performance by Meredith Monk and Ensemble, with Pacific Mozart Ensemble as Chorus. Bottom: Singer in alcove of Tower. Photos: Lynne Hayes/Courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.



They're not props. They're not even always used. They exist in the space.

And sometimes we bring them in and out. At Dartington we left them in the space the whole time. At the Walker Ann objected. She didn't like them in the space the whole time for this piece. She felt that space should open up sometime. So what we have been doing is that we bring them in and out, and that becomes another kind of cross layer that doesn't necessarily correspond to when they are going to be used again.

But I thought of them as books that you read. You are playing as if you are reading.

That is so interesting. I *love* that. That's beautiful.

Is the shruti a kind of harmonium?

It is not only one note. It has chords, basically it has clusters. I think that Indians probably play it more front-to-back. But I am more comfortable playing it sideways. The position of crouching over it is comfortable for me.

How have the musical ideas evolved in relation to the different spaces?

My earliest musical idea was to work with voices, strings, speeds: all instruments that could be portable. The Tower environment would not allow for keyboards, marimbas, etc. This was a limitation that was fascinating to work with since so much of my music has piano or keyboard as an integral part. Then I thought of breath: the connection between singing and meditation practice, where we always come back to our breath. In *Stringsongs*, the third movement is *Obsidian Chorale*, where I have written a series of chords which the string quartet bows in unison so that the strings seem like big inhalations and exhalations or a giant accordion going in and out—bowing as the equivalent of breathing. I wanted to continue further with that idea, and when Ellen Fisher gave me a shruti to play with I felt the connection of that to the movement of the string players, our breaths as singers and the wind instruments. Then as a contrast, I added the percussion—the only struck sounds in the piece—but I told John Hollenbeck that all his percussion instruments had to be portable. He came up with some wonderful small instruments and we made a harness for him to move with them.

So many of your pieces—mercy, impermanence, The Politics of Quiet—move in the realm of the spiritual. Aren't you striving for the transcendent?

Yes, I am, but I am also trying to wake people up. I am striving for theatre as a transformational experience and also as offering. So yes, those aspirations are there. Ascent just means you go up. But “ascension” also refers to ancestors. I feel that work like this needs to have a kind of rigor and lucidity to it, but the piece is strangely enough put together, and has enough mystery to allow each audience member to respond in his or her own way. I certainly am not trying to illustrate ascension. The

abstraction allows your mind to be free. I do not want to manipulate my audience in any way.

Last week I saw The Passion of Simone, a new oratorio by the Finnish composer Saariaho with Dawn Upshaw that was based on the life of Simone Weil, and directed by Peter Sellars. Having just seen that work and heard yours back-to-back it seems to me this turn to spiritual subject matter has brought an elegance to contemporary theatre that has previously been lacking. Of course, when one hears music like this, Messiaen comes to mind for his deep spiritual feeling. Now we know that he was rooted in Catholicism. Your music and the Saariaho composition represent more of a kind of secularization of the spiritual.

Well, I think that the world we are living in now desperately needs to have experiences that are direct, that are not filtered by discursive thought. Our culture is built on encouraging indirect experience—you either evaluate it or you narrate it. All these devices that are in our culture, like the computer, television—the speeding up of experience, the fragmenting of experience—are designed to distract you from direct experience. So everything is like secondary experience. I think that live performance gives you that possibility of actually having direct experience, slowing down time a little bit, which I appreciate very much, and I think of as an antidote. I don't know if I would say exactly the "secularization of the spiritual" because I think Buddhism itself is a non-theistic practice. My thinking for many years has been, Why do we also make a separation between art and spiritual practice? We don't think of art anymore as offering. There are so many cultures where it's totally integrated within daily life.

I use that term in a post-religion sense because I know many people are very uncomfortable talking about religion.

Religion and spirituality are two different things. I think religion does imply a theistic kind of thinking, whereas spirituality is more inclusive.

Is that the issue for you: the monotheism that you react against?

Coming from a Jewish background I have a strong reaction towards any organized religion.

Yet, Judaism, is a strong element in some other well-known composers, like Steve Reich and John Zorn. Philip Glass turned from his Jewish background to Buddhism. Nevertheless, the spiritual is a major impulse of their work.

I just feel that it is really important in this world to know that we are not the be-all and end-all of existence, and that there is a larger picture that we need to keep in mind. And, you know, there is a sense of magic that we are losing. Another thing I love so much—I've said it many times about live performances—is that we are in the same moment in the same space. There is a congregation of human beings,

including human beings who are performing and, in a sense, are so vulnerable. That level of communication is very important in the world that we are living in.

In the Dartington setup, where it was a very raw and pure performance situation, there was more of a congregational setting. Whereas the version at the Walker, and perhaps any future versions, will be more audience-oriented.

We're trying so hard to work against that. There were people in the audience who said, "We felt like we were just part of this whole thing." How do you get them out of that audience situation to become a congregation? That is one of our main questions we have been struggling with ever since we realized that we were going to have to do the piece in a theatre.

Is there a certain desire to move away from theatre or the theatrical?

I really want to move away from the theatrical in this piece. I just don't think it is appropriate. I think that the piece is very abstract and not pictorial. It is much more a piece about experience. It is more open-ended and has no narrative at all. Basically I'm trying to make a situation where all the senses are stimulated but you still have a lot of space to hear the music. You know, that is one of my biggest concerns. Not to get in the way of the music. That's why I have been very simple in the staging.

What you are creating is chamber music, and, more recently, symphonic music as well. A kind of contemporary classical music that is also highly virtuosic and refined. Earlier I used the word "elegant." As you move more towards this musical development I am interested to know how it is technically manifest in the bodies of the performers, in certain movements, and choice of imagery. There is something in contemporary music that is giving off this spiritual quality, and what is that to you?

In this piece I was very aware as I was making it that some of the music seemed to be very ethereal. I tried to make a balance of that with some of the more raw elements like the "Calls section," and that little trio that I do with Allison Sniffin and Todd Reynolds. Heaven, Earth, and Human—those three realms are needed to represent balance. Balance is something that I always think of in my work. I don't know if you remember when we were standing in the circle. I call that line "Strand 1." I was thinking a lot about lines. It had to do with the Tower and the threads of DNA. It is strange that I am speaking of the biological, but it refers to microcosm and macrocosm.

So physiologically the music is felt in the body, which responds, in turn, to space? Can you elaborate on that?

Well, for example, the end of the piece is a procession and that music was the first material I made. A procession usually implies walking. I realized that walking relates to either a 2/4 or 4/4 meter—both are even meters, which also relate to heartbeat. Usually I prefer to work with uneven meters, such as 5's or 7's. When I tried to add asymmetrical meters to the procession, they canceled out the movement of walk-

ing. There are other parts of the piece that have irregular rhythms that relate more to breathing and blood circulation. In the passage called “Falling” the strings do a very long *glissando* gesture passing the notes from one instrument to the other so you can get a sensation of the energy actually going down. Then the voices take it. The actual physicality of the space influenced the way I composed the music. A lot of the inspiration of how I voiced the music had to do with thinking about how to utilize the sound in the Tower. For example, in the Tower we will not be miked at all—the acoustic is very live and that influences my musical choices. Overall what I was working with was, How do you make a form that’s not built of separate sections? How do you make a structure that is an hour-long continuity, where the elements reappear in different contexts and weaves, forming and reforming a thread or line?

Speaking about the line . . . that is something Kandinsky wrote about, regarding the spiritual in art—there are certain kinds of lines and colors connected to abstraction that lead the way to a certain kind of thinking. I feel the same thing exists in music. I am interested in the quality of that sound. What is it that transports one? How is it felt in the body? For example, there are rhetorical styles—the use of certain forms of verse, or certain phrases, a certain way of talking different from ordinary language—that lift language in another direction. I guess I am trying to put you in the mindset of, say, Edgar Allan Poe when he tells in “The philosophy of composition” exactly what he did formally in “The Raven.” He did this, because of this effect. He did that because of that effect. I am interested in what a composer or director or choreographer does technically to create certain kind of effects.

I never think that way. That’s more a critical after the fact kind of thinking. I actually just burrow myself into my material, and try to solve the challenges that come up in the process, those internal problems of structure and of the key relationships. The narrative of the music has its own developmental clarity and integrity. I never think what the effect is going to be. I just go right into the material and try to deepen my understanding of it.

Well, it is clear that the work is also becoming more emotional year by year. Do you have any thoughts about that?

I know what you mean. In *Songs of Ascension*, you can feel this underlying . . . I can’t put my finger on it exactly.

It’s poignant and full of feeling.

I know, but then it’s a mystery.

I go to performances constantly. They’re very illustrative of the social crises that we are undergoing. There is very little work that has an emotional quality to it. As you know, emotion, beauty, elegance, are not much in evidence in the vocabulary of contemporary work. People are concerned with what the politics of work is.

I think a lot of it has to do with my meditation practice. My aspirations are very different now. I have worked all these years—forty-five or forty-six years—and now I just feel like I want to do something of benefit. The political work is really interesting but it also is very limited to its time. There was a period when I was working on *The Games*, *Recent Ruins*, and *Turtle Dreams Cabaret* that I was very interested in stating the problem. At a certain point I don't think people can actually work with that. I am really more a poet; I am not a political or analytical writer like Brecht, for example. I can only offer a perceptual experience since my work is primarily non-verbal. In this society where we are continually diverted from the moment, where everything is being numbed, I feel like performance can wake you up to the moment. All we actually have is the moment.

That comes from your Buddhist practice. Is the work always an aspect of spiritual practice—is that the way you think of it now?

I do. Absolutely. Oh, I am definitely trying to practice more because I don't know how many years I have left on the planet. You know, I had a big loss in my life, and so I'm certain that I or a loved one could just drop dead at any moment. That realization was the inspiration for *impermanence*. When you are working on a piece like *mercy* or *impermanence* you are contemplating something and asking questions that you know you don't have answers for and you never will. With *Songs of Ascension* I think it has to do with affirming certain human aspirations that have existed through all time. It's cross-cultural and has involved millions of people. I don't know how to say this exactly

Yes, we don't have a vocabulary for that. That's why it is hard.

We *don't* have a good vocabulary for that. When I was a young artist, creating *Education of the Girlchild* or *Vessel*, I was working on that level in those days too. I feel like my work always had that. But I think now I am a little bit more aware. At that time I just assumed it, or came to that approach instinctively, and now I feel like I am not afraid to do it. In our culture there is a kind of pressure of not articulating these things. Do you feel that too?

There's a drive toward documentation, toward replicating global crises, to feel you are making a contribution. On the other hand, there is a great desire for people to have experiences that are full of feeling. We have few of them in the artworks that are now created.

And feeling and emotion is not the same as sentiment. Real emotion—we don't even have a word for it. It's not anger, sadness. It's like subtle shades of feeling or energy. There is just not a lot of work that addresses that. Another thing that Ann and I have in common as artists is that we are both really interested in exploring the unknown and exploring the nameless. You know, if you could name it, then it is not really that interesting to work on. And that's why this interview is really difficult for me to get through . . . I can't talk about this very well.

The avant-garde started with symbolism, with silence, and the return to new spiritual movements, and also the idea of not naming things—tower symbolism, too. Here we are more than a hundred years later. Do we know what “the spiritual” means?

I have so much skepticism about that. It’s like, “Ahhhhh, I don’t know.”



Meredith Monk performing in the Tower, May 2008. Photo: Lynne Hayes/
Courtesy Ann Hamilton Studio.