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CLASSICAL CD REVIEW

Meredith Monk soars on 'Songs of Ascension'

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Songs of Ascension. Meredith Monk and Vocal Ensemble, Todd Reynolds Quartet, with The M6 and the Montclair State University Singers. ECM New Series 2154. \$25.16.

Language falls silent at Meredith Monk's music. "Songs of Ascension," her radiant new work, now released as a CD, picks up where language leaves off.

There's plenty of voice, of course. Monk's work is firmly centered on the human voice — here, babbling in wordless syllables, ululating like a coyote, extended like a siren. Voices hold out sustained chords in the reverent sonority of a full choir, or rise in expressive solos, like an aria without words or a folk song from a culture you might have remembered from a previous life. And sometimes, swooping downward in yowling curves after the winds, or making little surprised sounds like an upset cartoon animal, they are very funny. "Songs of Ascension" is a deeply spiritual piece, but not at all high-falutin.

It is, though, an ambitious work, perhaps one of Monk's most ambitious, with three vocal groups, a string quartet (the Todd Reynolds Quartet), plus winds, violin and percussion. Although simple in its means, it is unusually rich, for Monk, in its timbres and textures. Each of the 21 sections offers a distinct musical microclimate. Some repeat, like the elemental sound-building blocks called "clusters." Others stand alone, like the culminating big, extended quasi-chorale called "Ascent," which turns

loose all the musicians, the voices like bird calls in a jungle over the dark tread of the cello, in a warm and large-scale act of communion.

Monk's works are spare in the conventional compositional senses of counterpoint or harmony; the composer is more interested in the placement of music in the world around it. She's often labeled a choreographer for the performative elements of her works — this one was written to be performed in a tower, designed by the artist Ann Hamilton, with two separate but interleaved spiral staircases meeting at the top — and she deploys sounds with the same care with which she deploys bodies, inviting you to follow and explore their interrelations. Space is essential to this work, which explores the idea of ascending as a nearly ubiquitous metaphor for spirituality: Spiritual things, in almost every culture, are thought to go up, to heaven, or wisdom, or enlightenment.

There's a spiritual element to all of Monk's work, which is direct and heartfelt and honest without ever being deliberately naive; the composer and writer Kyle Gann, in the liner notes to this recording, compares her to a Druid priestess. Some dismiss her music as simple or simplistic, but it is simple in the way that a tree is simple, with its hundreds of rings, its branches, its disparate leaves. It is meaningless to be critical of a tree; you might not choose to spend time contemplating it, but the loss is all yours. So it is with this recording, beautifully made, rising strongly up to reach the sun.

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