MARCH 5
7:30 PM THURSDAY

MEMORIAL HALL
BEASLEY-CURTIS AUDITORIUM
75 MINUTES, NO INTERMISSION

CELLULAR SONGS: CONCERT VERSION
MEREDITH MONK & VOCAL ENSEMBLE

Composed by MEREDITH MONK

MEREDITH MONK, voice and keyboard
ALLISON EASTER, voice
ELLEN FISHER, voice
KATIE GEISSINGER, voice
ALLISON SNIFFIN, voice, violin, and keyboard
PERFORMANCE AS A LIFE SCIENCE

BY BONNIE MARRANCA

“AS ARTISTS, WE’RE ALL CONTENDING WITH WHAT TO DO AT A TIME LIKE THIS. I wanted to make a piece that can be seen as an alternative possibility of human behavior, where the values are cooperation, interdependence, and kindness, as an antidote to the values that are being propagated right now.” After a half-century as an influential figure in the creation of contemporary performance culture, Meredith Monk goes right to the heart of the challenge.

Cellular Songs is conceived for five women performers—Monk and her vocal ensemble consisting of Katie Geissinger, Allison Sniffin, Ellen Fisher, and Allison Easter. Dressed in layers of white and beige-toned clothes, the women sing, dance, and play the piano together, all the while modeling behavior of care, comfort, companionship, and collaboration. Glorious colors of sound arise from the intricate musical textures. The only words of the piece are in Monk’s song of wisdom, “Happy Woman.” Bodies alone make the landscape.

Cellular Songs inhabits its own special realm of music-theater in its soulful interweaving of music, theater, image, and movement. Monk describes her process in spatial terms: “Some of the pieces have much more dissonance and chromatic kind of harmonies, and the forms are almost like three-dimensional sculptures. Earlier, my music had much more to do with layering. Now you can almost see or hear the piece rotating as if it were a sculpture in space, though it’s just a musical form.” A visual architecture is built into its rigorous structure, which may look deceptively simple. The 75-minute work is scored for piano, keyboard, violin, and the shimmering chorus of women’s voices that animate the space.

The work of Monk as composer, performer, director, choreographer, and filmmaker has achieved a singular prominence in the world of performance. Her range extends from solo performance to site-specific works, from theater and opera to compositions for orchestra, chamber ensembles, and solo instruments. Monk’s sense of scale is equally versatile in works large and small, as varied as Quarry, Education of the Girlchild, Facing North, The Games, and the more recent mercy, impermanence, and Songs of Ascension. Starting with her own ecological consciousness and recent readings in medicine, she was drawn naturally to the dimensions of the cell. “The cell is the fundamental unit of life, but it can also reflect the fundamental units of the universe, so that it’s got this sense of us as part of a much bigger whole. I’ve become fascinated by their wit and their vibrancy. What is going on in the cell is so complex and it’s a real prototype of the possibility of what a society could be if you take those same principles and expand them.” Monk has always been interested in the reflective power of microcosm and macrocosm, a theme explored in her previous music-theater offering, On Behalf of Nature (2013).

What is distinctive in the experience of Cellular Songs is to watch its ethical fundamentals unfold over time in the performance on multiple levels: structurally, musically, and thematically. A philosophic worldview is viscerally demonstrated in the way the performers use their bodies to generate a social world. The women literally breathe into the space, creating the feeling of radiance. If, for Monk, the cell is the fundamental unit of life, she also affirms her
belief in the purity of perception: “Over the last 10 years I’ve had the impulse to boil down what I am doing to its essence. It is a very worthwhile thing to take on a theme that you can spend time contemplating, a theme that can never be answered and can only be hinted at and glimpsed. Literally, the process of making a piece is the process of contemplating something. To contemplate the ineffable is a wonderful way to spend your life.”

Art takes many forms to address global crises as a way of comprehending reality. Monk’s work has chosen a path different than the response that is a direct statement of conditions, following instead her Buddhist grounding in art as spiritual practice. Subtly, in recent years, she has been offering audiences a genre that has a certain luminosity and softness, emotion without sentimentality, sweetness along with the dissonance. Her work honors the human need for the feelings of joy and love and beauty. In the integrity of its regard, Cellular Songs is of this world but also beyond this world, like all poetic works of the imagination. •

Bonnie Marranca is founding publisher and editor of the Obie-Award winning PAJ Publications and PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, which celebrated its 40th year in 2016. She has written or edited 15 books on theater and the arts.

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MEREDITH MONK is a composer, singer, director, choreographer, filmmaker, and creator of new opera, music-theater works, films, and installations. Considered one of the most unique and influential artists of our time, she is a pioneer of what is now called “extended vocal technique” and “interdisciplinary performance.” Over the last six decades Monk has received numerous awards and honors including a MacArthur “Genius” award and Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Republic of France. Recently, Monk received three of the highest honors bestowed on a living artist in the United States: induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2019), the 2017 Dorothy and Lillian Gish Prize and a 2015 National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama. In conjunction with her 50th season of performing and creating work, she was named Carnegie Hall’s 2014-15 Debs Composer’s Chair. Celebrated internationally, Monk’s work has been presented at major venues throughout the world.

ELLEN FISHER is a movement-based performance artist whose work integrates gestural actions with visual elements such as film and shadow play. Fisher’s performance work is informed by her ethnographic research in the rituals and trance dances of South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka, for which she has received ACCNY grants and a Fulbright. She began performing with Meredith Monk/The House in the 1970s.

KATIE GEISSINGER has performed with Meredith Monk worldwide beginning with ATLAS in 1991, and can be heard on the majority of Monk’s recordings with ECM. Recent performances include Julia Wolfe’s Steel Hammer in collaboration with Anne Bogart’s SITI Company and The Bang on a Can All-Stars. Katie is also a member of the professional Cathedral Choir of St. John the Divine under the direction of Kent Tritle.

ALLISON EASTER is a dancer, singer, teacher, director, and producer. She has worked with Meredith Monk since 1985’s revival of Quarry, and was a performer and rehearsal director for STOMP, the Off-Broadway percussion show. Allison has directed and/or produced at The Ensemble Studio Theater and The NY Fringe Festival, taught at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and is on the faculty at Pace University.

ALLISON SNIFFIN, a multi-instrumentalist, singer, and composer, has been a member of Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble since 1996. Sniffin has received grants from Meet the Composer and Concert Artists Guild for her compositions. She is a frequent arranger/orchestrator for The Stonewall Chorale and Melodia Women’s Choir, NYC.

JO STEWART is a poet and theater maker. She uses a combination of gesture, voice, and text to make performance that investigates entrapment, borders, and freedom. Jo has previously been an artist in...
residence at Azule (2019), the Old American Can Factory (2019), the Anderson Center at Tower View (2018), among others. She is the newest member of Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble.

**YOSHIO YABARA** (costume design, scenography) received a B.A. in Linguistics in his native Japan, and studied stage design at the German state art universities in Stuttgart and West Berlin. He began his professional career as a costume designer for the Oscar-winning film *The Tin Drum*. Monk collaborations include *ATLAS*, the feature film *Book of Days*, impermanence, *Songs of Ascension*, and *On Behalf of Nature*. Mr. Yabara has also worked as a costume designer, stage designer, or art director for many theatrical and film productions in Europe, the USA, and Asia.

**JOE LEVASSEUR** (lighting design) has collaborated with many dance and performance artists, and is pleased to be working for the first time with Meredith Monk. He has received two Bessie awards for his lighting design work. Ongoing projects include lighting work for Brian Brooks, Big Dance Theater, and Pavel Zuziak/Palissimo.

**ELI WALKER** (sound design) is a graduate of Williams College. Over the last few years he has toured with Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble to such remote places as Abu Dhabi, Istanbul, and Budapest. He has also worked for such musicians as Natalie Merchant, Florence and the Machine, and Jay-Z.

**MEREDITH BELIS** (production/stage manager) works as a stage manager and theater technician in performance spaces around New York City. Artists she has worked with include Wendy Whelan, Brian Brooks, Neil Greenberg, Dean Moss, and Gwen Welliver. She is a graduate of Bennington College and is the Production Manager for the Dance Department at Sarah Lawrence College.

**KATHERINE FREER** (video design) is a multimedia designer working in theater, events, and installation. Her work is driven by the love of storytelling and belief in its power to shift reality. Frequent collaborators include Ping Chong, Liz Lerman, Tim Bond, Kamilah Forbes, and Talvin Wilks. She is a Helen Hayes nominee and an Innovative Theater Award nominee.

**BEN STECHSCHULTE** (cinematography) is a portrait, editorial and documentary photographer and filmmaker based in the Adirondacks and New York City. His work has been in publications including the *New York Times Magazine*, *TIME*, and *New York Magazine*. This is his first project with Monk.

**KIRSTIN KAPUSTIK** (executive director) has worked for more than ten years as a producer, curator, administrator and educator. She has worked at Center for Performance Research, The Whitney Museum, and New York Live Arts, among others. Kirstin joined Meredith Monk/The House Foundation for the Arts as Executive Director in 2017.