

Performance

Meredith Monk's *ATLAS* in Los Angeles

ATLAS, an opera in three parts by Meredith Monk.

Libretto and choreography by the composer.

World Premiere: 22 February 1991, at the Houston Grand Opera.

Performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, Disney Hall, Los Angeles (June 11, 12, and 14, 2019).

Paolo Bortolameolli, conductor. Yuval Sharon, director. Es Devlin, designer.

Luke Halls, projection designer. Danielle Agami, choreographer.

Emma Kingsbury, costume designer. John Torres, lighting designer.

Milena Manocchia, Joanna Lynn-Jacobs, and Ann Carlson, Alexandra.

Recording: “*ATLAS*: an opera in three parts,” ECM Records, 1993 (ECM 1491/92).

La commedia è finita!

Vollendet das ewige Werk!

Oh! Oh! mes cheveux descendent de la tour!

News has a kind of mystery.

For opera lovers who understand and can place them, these lines conjure up vivid images and emotions. They may stimulate memories of musical themes, lavish sets, lighting effects, or even spark nostalgic reminiscences of pleasurable evenings shared among the company of friends or loved ones at the opera house. Of course, theories of the libretto's ability to shape dramatic flow and its influence on musical realization in opera aroused passionate debates from its very inception. This is familiar territory: Giulio Cesare Monteverdi vindicated opera composers' expressive musical language when he argued the passions expressed through the text justified unprepared dissonances in madrigals. On the other hand, Pier Jacopo Martello declared in 1715 that poetry ought to have the lowest place in opera, not the highest, because the proper place for words was in the theater, not the opera house.¹ This discourse did not take place solely on a theoretical level; it became the subject of Salieri's one-act opera *Prima la musica e poi le parole* (1786), which revolves around a composer who has written a viable operatic musical score for which there are as yet

no words. A century and a half later, Strauss's *Capriccio* (1942) takes on the same question, arguably with ambivalence: which comes first—poetry or music?

Regardless of their relative place in opera's hierarchy of constructive elements, most listeners would probably regard words as an essential characteristic of the genre. Salieri's composer believes his composition to be incomplete without the poet's craft. Indeed, words seem so fundamental to opera that even verbalizations without any specific lexical meaning are elevated and often seem to take on unusually pungent significance: instead of choosing excerpts from *I Pagliacci*, *Das Rheingold*, *Pelleas et Mélisande*, and *Nixon in China*, I probably could have inserted the equally well-known utterances "Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm!" from *Die Zauberflöte* or "Hoyotoho!" from *Die Walküre* at the beginning of this article. It is therefore ironic that even though words seem to be an essentializing condition for opera, audiences seldom understand the meaning of the words themselves. Without supertitles, many operagoers have no idea what libretti actually mean, as they are so frequently sung in a foreign language.²

For those who actually do understand the meaning of the libretto, many realize that operatic texts often carry connotations less benign than they may seem at first hearing. For some, the whole notion of language itself is problematic. A growing branch of philosophy has shed light on the way language often marginalizes women, subtly coerces individuals into performing stereotyped gender roles, and perpetuates injustices against disempowered groups.³ Through music, opera sometimes magnifies the subcutaneous violence that language insinuates.⁴ How might one confront language's silencing effect or its hermeneutic injustices in a libretto? A radical solution would simply be to eliminate the words entirely—but then, what would opera be like *without* that which many regard as an indispensable component? Would the price of freeing opera from one of its problematic signifying strata—music, voice, performance practice, staging, and gesture all signify, too—justify the liquidation of the verbal terrain?

Composing opera without words—or creating an environment wherein the appearance of words is the exception, rather than the rule—is, I think, one of the great achievements of Meredith Monk. Already with her early studio opera work *Education of the Girlchild* (1972), Monk used the particular qualities of her voice to intone not so much words as sounds or idiosyncratic vocalizations that, estranged from the semiotic network of language, allowed more uninhibited associations to flow. Because she never invited the potentially coercive structures of language to the table in the first place, her work did not have to labor against them, opening up a space in which other musico-dramatic elements could dwell. Part of what attracted the admiration of critics, colleagues, and collaborators was that Monk's work did not have to cast out an unwelcome visitor, and instead could focus on developing a highly effective language of bodily movement, lyricism, and image to a greater extent than might otherwise be possible.

A series of intriguing works followed *Education of the Girlchild*, culminating in *Dolmen Music* (1979), a piece that led to her breakout recording with ECM New Series records. In 1985, Monk collaborated with the Houston Grand Opera Studio Singers on *Dolmen Music*, in a successful experiment meant to assess whether classically trained opera singers could execute her extended vocal techniques. In turn, *Dolmen Music* led to an invitation from Houston Opera director David Gockley for *ATLAS*, Monk's first full-length opera. The work debuted in Houston in 1991 and subsequently toured New York City, Columbus, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Berlin, and Paris. Apart from the German critics who panned it ("A Big Mac disguised as an opera"⁵), most critics reacted positively, save one whose analysis went little further than suggesting its "untexed vocalise" warranted the category "music theater," not opera. In this critique, Monk's emphasis on movement and visual elements, as well as a "fragility of musical expression" place it somehow "beneath opera"—a dubious claim given that the composer herself assigned so much value to vocal expression.⁶

The Los Angeles Philharmonic recently revived *ATLAS* in a fully staged performance marking the high point of director Yuval Sharon's three-year residency there. Es Devlin designed the ambitious set, which principally consisted of a gigantic globe that seemed magically to spin. Occasionally the sphere opened up, revealing performers inside. Vivid moving images such as the continents, or arrestingly beautiful abstract lines and colors were projected on the globe, transforming it in all kinds of lively and imaginative ways. Monk delegated the vocal coaching to Katie Geissinger, a member of her vocal ensemble, and to Jeanette LoVetri, Monk's own longtime voice teacher. Monk worked personally with the singers for a week before the production opened. A select group of LA Philharmonic instrumentalists formed the small pit orchestra under the direction of Paolo Bortolameolli. For the first time in her career, Monk did not perform the role she originated in *ATLAS*. Nevertheless, the response from the press was overwhelmingly positive. Zachary Woolfe wrote in the *New York Times* that the performance was "radiant," "eye-popping," and a piece of "sophistication and childlike wonder,"⁷ while the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer (who coincidentally also used the word "eye-popping") liberally lavished praise on the production and the performers.⁸ What exactly is it that appealed so strongly to reviewers on both coasts?

We can begin to answer this question by examining the narrative. The source for *ATLAS*'s action could have been a *Bildungsroman*, but one where the protagonist is a woman. The opera is loosely based on the real-life travels of Alexandra David Néel (1868–1969), a free-spirited character whose brief career as a professional opera singer was overshadowed by her astounding sojourns throughout Tibet, in an era when almost no Europeans had set eyes on that remote and forbidding part of the world. Néel spent many years studying Buddhism and became something of a revered presence in Tibet, enjoying personal audiences with the Dalai Lama and

many other important Buddhist masters. Monk, who by 1989 was already a committed meditation practitioner,⁹ also drew—consciously or not—from other Buddhist texts, particularly the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*.

Monk's opera begins with young Alexandra in her parents' home, expressing a will to see the world. She encounters a Spirit Guide in the form of a horse, which imbues her with the courage to forge her own destiny and journey beyond the borders of her small town. As a young adult, Alexandra meets potential traveling companions, and after hearing them sing, settles on two (the third is at first rejected but he is not entirely cast aside and joins the group later). The small group starts its journey at the airport, its purpose to seek enlightenment.

In Part 2, the group—which progressively becomes larger, finally numbering five—explores various spaces: an agricultural community, an ice bar in the arctic, a rain forest, and a desert. Along the way, each member of the team faces demons, which test their inner resolve. One companion, tempted by the appeal of a fascist society, is left behind despite the group's concerted efforts.

The third and final part sees the remaining travelers, led by Alexandra, ascend to a metaphoric, timeless place—a spiritual domain located somewhere high above Earth itself. Monk reserved one of her most radiant musical creations for this section, entitled “Invisible Light. Earth Seen from Above.” This number functions almost as a kind of anti-climax. Where Wagner would at times deploy his repertoire of leitmotives so rapidly that they almost trip over one another, Monk brings the onward rush of time almost to a standstill; the only motion evident is the almost imperceptible turning of the globe before our eyes (a feature that was new in the LA production). The entire cast of singers, aligned in a single row facing the audience, sings a slow wordless chorus *a cappella*. After this calm soundscape comes to a graceful close, a brief scene completes the opera as we witness an elderly Alexandra return to her hometown, having finally attained the wisdom she desired as a child.

Some writers have found aspects of *ATLAS* quite conventional: its use of arias, duets, trios, choruses, and instrumental interludes clearly borrows from the traditional operatic vocabulary.¹⁰ Alex Ross honed in on a dialectic of conventional ingredients and extraordinary effects: “the wonder of *ATLAS* . . . is the emergence of an intricately varied musical language from simple-seeming materials: ditty-like melodies, austere modal harmonies, gradually shifting minimalist rhythms.”¹¹ But it seems to me that hearing *ATLAS* as a set of conventional operatic devices—even if the sum amounts to more than the parts—is only part of its wonder. In fact, *ATLAS* proposes a more radical approach to opera itself. Through it, Monk invites us to rethink what opera can be, proposing a possible way out of its long and troubling history of misogyny, which as we keep learning from scandals reported by the media, gets enacted over and over again both on the stage and behind the set.

Locating tangible answers to specific musical questions, or tracing a definitive compositional history for *ATLAS* is difficult because Monk created the piece in

collaboration with her singers without writing out a formal score in advance.¹² Instead of budgeting for elaborate sets or costumes for the 1991 Houston premiere, Monk allocated most of her funds to pay for an intensive twelve-week rehearsal process, forming a miniature community out of her cast. She insisted that each performer learn all of the vocal parts by memory, and then assigned roles based on what qualities matched each performer best. Monk's workshop approach placed a high value on group dynamics, and allowed the performers' bodies to resonate with the drama, instead of obliging them to conform to a predetermined score.¹³ Monk's innovative performer-community flattened the hierarchical, top-down power relationships that have traditionally been the means by which operas come about. She depended on the performers not just to enact the piece, but also to form it along with her. In 2010, Kyle Gann explored *ATLAS* using a 392-page score acquired directly from the composer herself. Gann concluded that it was a "starting point for the piece, not an end product in itself."¹⁴ Some parts are notated fairly precisely, some take on a much more free quality in performance than they appear to on the page, while others are written simply as jagged, squiggly lines. Occasionally an entire section is mysteriously blotted out.

On first hearing, it is possible to conclude that the musical vocabulary of *ATLAS* bears strong kinship to the repetitive structures of classical American "minimalist" music, epitomized by Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Monk has opposed this association, claiming that her music had too much emotional content for it to fall comfortably into the category of minimalism. She also cites her folk music influences as a key difference.¹⁵ Indeed, Monk's *ostinati* often subtly evolve, changing emphasis from phrase to phrase. Her music does not typically rely on the *ostinato* pattern structurally, but instead uses it to support a wordless vocal line. Glass's *Satyagraha* (which shares a nominal affinity to *ATLAS* both on account of its orientation toward Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and its broad musical style) differs in significant ways. First, Glass's orchestra is considerably larger than Monk's chamber ensemble and lacks the emphasis on keyboards that strongly marks *ATLAS*. Second, Glass's writing tends toward a more autonomous orchestral texture, whereas Monk's instrumental music would struggle to exist independently of the vocal layer. Finally, Glass's texts tend to emphasize the actions of men whose public engagement had significant external effects on broad swaths of society. In contrast, Monk's opera is much more concerned with the experiences of a woman's internal journey and self-discovery: here, inward change becomes the theme.

A notable result of *ATLAS*'s lack of words is the freeing up of the piece such that it belongs to no one particular linguistic tradition. Even though the few words that are sung or spoken are mostly in English, they add only slightly to the substance of the narrative itself, and often function in a humorous way. It is instead the quality of the voice itself that Monk uses to invoke narrative. Alexandra rejects Franco Hartmann's petition to join the group as a traveling companion in Part I not solely

on the basis of what he says, but also on how he sings and, in Sharon's production, how he dances. This way of connecting with the audience has proven successful because, as I mentioned earlier, the libretto, while important for some, often fails to form the strongest bond between listeners and works. Cutting down on the words allows performers to develop sonic and physical connections with the audience in ways that may be surprisingly effective.

One element of *ATLAS* that many writers have not yet considered fully is its spiritual nature. This aspect further explains the work's success. Monk has questioned the need for a division between art and spiritual practice, pointing out that one does not exclude the other in a person's daily routine.¹⁶ Bonnie Marranca sees traces of American transcendentalism in *ATLAS*.¹⁷ However, I think that *ATLAS* is most closely aligned to the spiritual world of another titan of late-twentieth-century opera, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Monk's characters move toward light in *ATLAS*; light is where the ultimate realization of divine oneness occurs. In Stockhausen's epic operatic heptology *Licht*, the composer understands light as catalyzing a similar euphoric ecstasy.

There are uncanny similarities between *ATLAS* and *Donnerstag* (Thursday), the first opera in Stockhausen's *Licht* cycle. The trajectory of Alexandra's spiritual quest begins at home with her parents, moves through a series of foreign places scattered around the globe, and positions the ultimate rapture beyond the confines of Earth itself. Alexandra's route mirrors Michael's journey in *Donnerstag* act-for-act. Even the central visual image—a terrestrial globe—has appeared prominently in both operas; Stockhausen's entire middle act is essentially a trumpet concerto *without words*. Michael's final monologue in *Donnerstag*, "Vision," a piece of astonishing calm and timelessness, functions for *Donnerstag* what "Earth Seen from Above" does for *ATLAS*. This strong relationship does not in any way lessen Monk's accomplishment, as she chose a much different musical means to realize her vision. Even so, these two operas share a deep kinship. *Donnerstag*'s recent popularity (with major performances in Amsterdam and Paris within the last year) resonates with the revival underway to keep *ATLAS* from vanishing into oblivion.

Both Stockhausen and Monk had to grapple with the fact that, to a great degree, their works' initial success depended on their creator's personal vision and direct involvement. Thanks to the ongoing efforts of Stockhausen's foundation, not to mention the tireless efforts of his two principal collaborators Suzanne Stephens and Kathinka Pasveer, a great number of artists now have experience bringing his operatic works to the stage. The greatest danger in preserving *ATLAS* is not that there will be a lack of young artists willing to take on such an ambitious challenge, as the rewards both for the cast and the audience are so tangible. Rather, it is that Monk's novel and liberating way of working with her artists may be swallowed up by more conventional (and cheaper) ways of preparing the performance.

Despite its many virtues, there is one aspect of *ATLAS* that warrants critique. Alexandra's ambitions to expand her experiential world and gain spiritual enlightenment could hardly be more noble. But the way in which she goes about attaining wisdom may appear to some as a distinctly first-world endeavor. After all, not everyone can afford a long-term project that includes crisscrossing the globe with friendly companions, soaking up cultural experiences that spontaneously present themselves in exotic locales. Even though Néel traveled in poverty throughout Tibet, she accomplished her odyssey because she herself had personal wealth and connections in society. Consider that the Buddhist monk who plays the central role in *Journey to the West* goes through a similar adventure without incurring the steep cost of airfare bookings or baggage surcharges. One possible way out of this critique is to view Alexandra's adventure as a metaphor for the discoveries we make on our own, either privately within our minds, or publicly as we trace a path from our hometown or birthplace. Alexandra's trip of self-discovery may be too much of a luxury for many to enjoy nowadays.

However one ultimately views *ATLAS*, it prompts us to consider what the future of opera might look like without the mechanisms of violence that often permeate the art form's murky institutional substructure. Dana Reason suggested that the title "Atlas" comes from converting the mythological male character to a female one: the "heavy burden" that Alexandra must support is the discovery of her own inner spiritual life.¹⁸ I suggest that *ATLAS* may also bear the accumulated, congealed mass of wrongdoing both within many repertoire operas themselves, as well as in an industry that manages, produces, and commodifies these thrilling, yet problematic works. Indeed, the world has changed greatly since 1991, and it is a sign of *ATLAS*'s success that many things that happen in it no longer strike anyone as particularly unusual. But whatever we decide the ultimate meaning of the title might be, one thing is clear: *ATLAS* is an opera that the world needs, both for today and the future.

Paul V. Miller

NOTES

A native of Poughkeepsie, New York, Paul Miller is both a writer and a performer. His publications may be found in *Perspectives of New Music*, *Music & Letters*, *Twentieth-Century Music*, *Early Music*, and *Opera Quarterly*. As a performer, he premiered the viola version of Stockhausen's *In Freundschaft* in 2005, but also specializes in Baroque music. He has been heard as a soloist at the National Cathedral, the Library of Congress, with the Washington Bach Consort, the Bethlehem Bach Festival, and elsewhere. Currently he serves as an assistant professor of

musicianship at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

1. Pier Jacopo Martello, *Della tragedia antica e moderna* (Rome: F. Gonzaga, 1715), 165.

2. See Susan McClary, preface to Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xiv.

3. For a concise summary, see plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-language.

4. Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
5. Charles Ward, "German Critics React Skeptically to HGO's 'ATLAS,'" *Houston Chronicle*, July 24, 1991.
6. David Wright, review of *ATLAS*, ECM New Series, in *Musical Times* 135, no. 1812 (February, 1994), 110–11. Monk has said that her works are operas because they "have a structure from beginning to end." See Bonnie Marranca, *Conversations with Meredith Monk* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2014), 102.
7. Zachary Woolfe, "After 27 Years, Meredith Monk's 'ATLAS' Returns to Earth," *New York Times*, June 12, 2019.
8. Mark Swed, "'ATLAS' Needs No Words to Astonish as the L.A. Phil Wraps Its Centennial Season," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 2019.
9. Personal communication with the composer, August 2019. Also see Leslie Lassetter, "Meredith Monk: An Interview about Her Recent Opera, *ATLAS*," *Contemporary Music Review* 16, nos. 1–2 (1997): 60.
10. Woolfe, "After 27 Years, Meredith Monk's 'ATLAS' Returns to Earth."
11. Alex Ross, "Meredith Monk's 'ATLAS' and the L.A. Phil's Extraordinary Season," *New Yorker*, June 24, 2019.
12. Dana Reason, "The New Vocal Utterance: The Music of Meredith Monk," *Twentieth-Century Music* 6, no. 3 (1999): 18.
13. Robert Sandla, "Dream Weaver: Meredith Monk Brings Her Newest Multimedia Music-theater Piece to Houston," *Opera News* 55, no. 11 (February 16, 1991): 8–11.
14. Kyle Gann, "Getting off the Assembly Line," available online at www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2010/01/getting_off_the_assembly_line.html, accessed September 15, 2019.
15. Sandla, "Dream Weaver."
16. Marranca, *Conversations with Meredith Monk*, 74.
17. Bonnie Marranca, "Meredith Monk's Atlas of Sound: New Opera and the American Performance Tradition," *Performing Arts Journal* 14, no. 11 (1992): 23.
18. Reason, "The New Vocal Utterance: The Music of Meredith Monk.": 18.