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THE ELIZABETH SPRAGUE COOLIDGE FOUNDATION  
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FOUNDER'S DAY WEEKEND

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**MEREDITH MONK  
& VOCAL ENSEMBLE  
THE SOUL'S MESSENGER**

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Friday, October 30, 2015 - 8 pm  
Coolidge Auditorium  
Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson Building

In 1925 ELIZABETH SPRAGUE COOLIDGE established the foundation bearing her name in the Library of Congress for the promotion and advancement of chamber music through commissions, public concerts and festivals; to purchase music manuscripts; and to support music scholarship. With an additional gift, Mrs. Coolidge financed the construction of the Coolidge Auditorium, which has become world famous for its magnificent acoustics and for the caliber of artists and ensembles who have played there.

ELIZABETH SPRAGUE COOLIDGE  
(1864-1953)

The Library of Congress observes the date of her birth, October 30th, as Founder's Day, and on that day regularly presents a concert in her honor.

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**The Library of Congress  
Coolidge Auditorium  
Friday, October 30, 2015 — 8 pm**

THE ELIZABETH SPRAGUE COOLIDGE FOUNDATION  
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FOUNDER'S DAY WEEKEND

**MEREDITH MONK  
& VOCAL ENSEMBLE**

**THE SOUL'S MESSENGER**

**MEREDITH MONK**, VOICE & PIANO

**KATIE GEISSINGER**, VOICE

**ALLISON SNIFFIN**, VOICE & PIANO

**BOHDAN HILASH**, WOODWINDS



**Program**

**I. Music for Unaccompanied Voice**

*Composed and Performed by Meredith Monk*

Selections from:

*Juice: A Theatre Cantata in Three Installments* (1969)

*Songs from the Hill* (1975-1976)

*Light Songs* (1988)

**II. Music for Voice and Piano**

*Composed and Performed by Meredith Monk*

"Gotham Lullaby" from *Fear and Loathing in Gotham* (1975)

"Traveling" from *Education of the Girlchild* (1973)

"Madwoman's Vision" from *Book of Days* (1988)

### III. Music for Voice, Keyboard and Woodwinds

*Composed by Meredith Monk*

"Choosing Companions" from *ATLAS: an opera in three parts* (1991)

*Meredith Monk, Katie Geissinger, Allison Sniffin*

"Hips Dance" from *Volcano Songs: Duets* (1993)

*Meredith Monk, Katie Geissinger*

"Hocket" from *Facing North* (1990)

*Meredith Monk, Katie Geissinger*

#### INTERMISSION

"Prayer I" from *The Politics of Quiet* (1996)

*Allison Sniffin*

"Scared Song" from *Acts from Under and Above* (1986)

*Meredith Monk, Allison Sniffin*

"epilogue" and "woman at the door" from *mercy* (2001)

*Katie Geissinger, Meredith Monk, Allison Sniffin, Bohdan Hilash*

"clusters 3" from *Songs of Ascension* (2008)

*Bohdan Hilash*

"Panda Chant I" and "Memory Song" from *The Games* (1984)

"masks" from *mercy* (2001)

"between song" from *impermanence* (2004/2006)

*Katie Geissinger, Meredith Monk, Allison Sniffin, Bohdan Hilash*

This program is approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes long, with one 15 minute intermission.



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Costume Design: Yoshio Yabara/Morgane Le Fay

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All compositions by Meredith Monk ©Meredith Monk Music/ASCAP

# Texts

## "Memory Song"

*Words by Meredith Monk*

I remember mushrooms  
I remember candlelight  
I remember early morning coffee  
I remember fish  
Ich erinnere mich an das tisch gebet (I remember saying grace)  
I remember newspapers  
I remember a black Suzuki  
Je pense à mon lit (I think of my bed)  
I remember rain  
I remember aspirin  
I am thinking of Shakespeare's garden

## "between song"

*Words by Mieke van Hoek*

Between the paint and the wood  
Between the pen and the writing hand  
Between the rug and the floor  
Between the hairs on her head

Between the clouds and the night  
Between the window and the street  
Between the air and the men walking  
Between the heels and the sound

Between the skull and the brain  
Between the lens and the eye  
Between the tear and the lens  
Between the lipstick and the lips

Between this hand and that hand  
Between the water and the rock  
Between his hand and her hand  
Between your hand and my hand  
Between the seed and the dirt

# About the Program

By Frank J. Oteri

## Celebrating a National Treasure—Meredith Monk at the Library of Congress

Described as “an incomparable musician” by President Barack Obama who presented her with the National Medal of the Arts on September 10, 2015, Meredith Monk (b. 1942, New York, NY) has performed many artistic roles in a career that has now spanned more than half a century—singer, pianist, dancer, director, choreographer, actress, installation artist, and filmmaker, but above all, composer. Her extremely distinctive output—which has encompassed and transcended such descriptive monikers as opera, theatre, chamber and orchestral music—has been an extraordinary synthesis of multiple artistic practices. But the core of it has always been humanity’s most personal and vulnerable means of expression—the voice, for which she has created (at first just for her own performance and subsequently for others trained through an intensive orally-transmitted workshop process) a completely new and incredibly diverse range of sounds. Tonight’s concert spans music that Monk has created over a forty year period and ranges from brief unaccompanied vocal pieces to excerpts from monumental, evening-length works.

### I. Music for Unaccompanied Voice

The program opens with Monk performing a series of unaccompanied solos, created for her own breathtakingly versatile three octave-ranged voice, for three very different projects. The earliest material, dating back to 1969, is from a performance piece she created in her mid-20s called *Juice: A Theatre Cantata in Three Installments*. A harbinger of much of her work since, *Juice* is paradoxically grandiose and intimate at the same time, and its music already incorporated some of her trademark, immediately-recognizable vocal techniques. Its original site-specific performance occurred in three separate locations in New York City. First, a cast totaling 85 people filled the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum. (It was the first time a live performance had ever taken place there.) Then, a group of nine performers were framed by the proscenium stage of Barnard College’s Minor Latham Playhouse. Finally, in Monk’s own loft, there were no live performers at all, just video projections and objects. While *Juice* was an elaborate performance art piece in which music was only one of many elements, for *Songs from the Hill* musical considerations are the central concern. Composed on a hill in New Mexico between 1975 and 1976, these miniatures are an encyclopedic compendium of vocal techniques comparable to Paganini’s celebrated 24 Caprices for solo violin. Whispers, screams, and glottal stops combine with pure melody to form a stunning tour-de-force for a virtuoso soloist that is both intellectually compelling and emotionally engaging. *Light Songs*, from 1988, is solo music only in terms of its realization—conceptually it is actually music with two distinct parts and it frequently sounds like it is being performed by two people. While the individual strands might deceptively sound simple, to perform them at the same time—e.g. to hum a melody and click a rhythm—is actually immensely difficult to do.

## II. Music for Voice and Piano

Since the 1970s, Monk has been composing for the piano in a musical language that might best be described as a kind of post-modern impressionism—modal, but frequently filled with ambiguous harmonies; rhythmically cyclical and chock full of ostinatos, but often with unusual syncopations and off-kilter groupings. When Monk uses the piano to accompany her otherworldly approach to the voice, the result is an extremely riveting symbiosis. The piano simultaneously helps ground the performance but also, given her idiosyncratic approach to the instrument, makes it sometimes feel even less grounded. Tonight's program includes two such works in which she will accompany herself. In **"Gotham Lullaby,"** initially composed for Ping Chong's 1975 theatre piece *Fear and Loathing in Gotham*, the piano's aphoristic arpeggiations make even the most extreme vocalizations seem soothing. On the other hand, in **"Traveling,"** from her 1973 opera *Education of the Girlchild*, the piano's relentless chugging fully complements the freneticism of the vocal line.

**"Madwoman's Vision"** is from Meredith Monk's 1988 experimental film *Book of Days* in which a young Jewish girl in Medieval Europe named Eva sees visions of New York in the 20th century and draws them. Meredith Monk has outlined the scenario in her program notes for the 1990 ECM recording of this music:

When the young girl tries to describe her visions to her grandfather, he gives them a Biblical interpretation. Misunderstood by her family and community, the young girl finds in the madwoman a kindred spirit whose overview of the flow of time and compassion for human suffering, ignorance and violence in relation to the power of nature, gives Eva a sense of comfort and understanding of her own clairvoyance.

The music begins with the voice's quasi-shamanistic incantations presented completely alone. The accompaniment enters almost unobtrusively with slowly moving dyads that sound somewhat organum-like but are actually much more modern harmonies—an ideal sonic metaphor for this narrative of temporal displacement.

## III. Music for Voice, Keyboard and Woodwinds

Over the decades Meredith Monk has used the word "opera" to describe many of her compositions, but her 1991 *ATLAS: an opera in three parts*, which was commissioned and premiered by the Houston Grand Opera, is perhaps the one work in her oeuvre that is most clearly related to the repertoire of the standard operatic canon. Still, it is a far cry from conventional operatic literature. Like most of her output, it mostly eschews language and a clear-cut linear narrative, opting for a subtler but deeper, subconscious emotional communication that is universal and which words can often hinder. *ATLAS* is loosely inspired by the writings of French explorer Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969), the first European woman to travel to Tibet. Monk wanted to feature a female explorer as an archetype and to use exploration as a metaphor for spiritual quest. In **"Choosing Companions,"** a comic scene from the first part of the opera, three applicants vie to join Alexandra on her journey but only two of them are chosen.

While *Light Songs* are duets performed by one singer, Monk's 1993 *Volcano Songs: Duets*, from which "**Hips Dance**" will be presented this evening, are de facto solos requiring two performers. In the booklet notes for the 1997 ECM recording, Monk describes the performance process as "two voices so intertwined that you can hardly tell that two different people are singing." She originally worked out this material by multi-tracking her own voice and then taught it orally to Katie Geissinger with whom she originally performed it and with whom she is performing it again tonight. Geissinger also joins Monk to perform the "**Hocket**" from *Facing North* (1990). While Monk's music has often been described as "folk music from another planet," that description seems particularly apt for this stunning two-part vocal piece which seems to simultaneously hint at Inuit singing games, the ensemble vocal music of the Mbuti pygmies from the Ituri Rainforest, early Medieval European polyphony, and nothing previously imagined by the human species.

Following the intermission, Allison Sniffin sings and accompanies herself on the piano for "**Prayer I**," the opening of Meredith Monk's 1996 music theatre piece *The Politics of Quiet*, a work unique in her entire oeuvre in that it is the only large scale vocal work she purposefully composed to date for performance without her. "Prayer I" is extremely beautiful music devoid of any extended techniques—a yearning vocal melody is woven around a progression of slowly moving block chords, chock full of suspensions, on the piano. In the original production, ten singers stood in front of one another, and each sang a phrase of the melody before walking off stage in turn. Since none of their lines overlap, this music is easily adaptable to performance by a single singer; ironically, by performing this music by herself, Sniffin takes this "third person" music and returns it to the "first person." Monk returns to the stage to sing "**Scared Song**" accompanied at the piano by Sniffin. Originally composed for *Acts from Under and Above*, a 1986 music/theatre piece created in collaboration with Lanny Harrison, it is one of the few pieces by Monk to feature sung words. But it is a far cry from conventional text setting; the words, which are repeatedly sung, take on ritualistic qualities and are often obscured by other non-verbal syllables.

The next two selections, "**epilogue**" and "**woman at the door**," are both from *mercy* (2001), which was a significant creative departure for Monk. Although she had always created all aspects of her work alone, for *mercy* she collaborated with visual artist Ann Hamilton. The original music for this staged work included improvised interludes by keyboardist Allison Sniffin and clarinetist Bohdan Hilash who are also both participating in tonight's performance.

After *mercy*, Monk began composing instrumental ensemble pieces for the first time, starting with *Possible Sky* for the New World Symphony in 2003, and continuing with *Stringsongs* written for the Kronos Quartet in 2004-2005. In her 2008 *Songs of Ascension*, which was originally performed in a double helix-shaped space in Sonoma, California designed by Ann Hamilton, instruments are more prominent than they had been in any of Monk's previous vocal works. Vocal passages are punctuated by sections scored exclusively for instruments. There are three pieces in *Songs of Ascension* named "clusters" which occur at pivotal points: the first, which opens the work, is scored for string quartet and the second is for large chorus and percussion. The final one is Bohdan

Hilash's unaccompanied improvisation "**clusters 3**" which he performs on the khaen gao, a Southeast Asian free reed mouth organ capable of polyphony that is an antecedent of the harmonica.

"**Panda Chant I**" and "**Memory Song**" were both composed for *The Games*, a science fiction opera Monk created with director, choreographer, and installation artist Ping Chong in 1984. Unlike "Panda Chant II," another passage from *The Games* which requires the singers to also stomp and clap (and which has now become one of Monk's most widely performed pieces), "Panda Chant I" only requires the singers to use their mouths, but it has an equally infectious rhythmic drive. "Memory Song" also uses words, written by Monk, which are sung in English, German, and French. A strangely incongruous list of items is enumerated—mushrooms, candlelight, coffee, fish, newspapers, rain, aspirin, etc.—but nothing is ever concretely explained; it is as elusive as memories are. This is followed by "**masks**," another selection from *mercy*, which is an intense breathy quartet for four voices.

The program concludes with "**between song**," a selection from Monk's *impermanence* (2004-2006). Already the seeds of her most recent compositions, in which voices and instruments vie on almost equal terms with one another—as they do in *Songs of Ascension*—can be heard. "In the past I deliberately kept my instrumental writing simple and transparent to leave space for the voice to fly," she explained in her program notes. "Now I am allowing myself to think of the instruments as voices." This deeper engagement with instruments has also led Monk to explore a more chromatic harmonic vocabulary. Although Monk's creations from the very beginning have always been abstract, there is an autobiographical component to *impermanence*. It was inspired by a personal tragedy, the sudden death of Monk's life partner, choreographer Mieke van Hoek (1946-2002); "between song" is a setting of van Hoek's words, found after her death. It is perhaps the most direct text setting Monk has ever done. The words come through clearly in a beautiful, unadorned melody against shimmering and occasionally dissonant instrumental clashes. It is a poignant ending to a concert that has taken us on a fascinating journey through what the human voice is capable of thanks to the fertile imagination of one of our most original musical creators.

###

ASCAP award-winning composer and music journalist Frank J. Oteri is the Composer Advocate for New Music USA and the Senior Editor of its web magazine, *NewMusicBox* ([www.newmusicbox.org](http://www.newmusicbox.org)).

## About the Artists

**Meredith Monk** is a composer, singer, director/choreographer and creator of new opera, music-theater works, films and installations. Recognized as one of the most unique and influential artists of our time, she is a pioneer in what is now called “extended vocal technique” and “interdisciplinary performance.” Monk creates works that thrive at the intersection of music and movement, image and object, light and sound, discovering and weaving together new modes of perception. Her ground-breaking exploration of the voice as an instrument, as an eloquent language in and of itself, expands the boundaries of musical composition, creating landscapes of sound that unearth feelings, energies, and memories for which there are no words. Over the last fifty years, she has been hailed as “a magician of the voice” and “one of America’s coolest composers.” Celebrated internationally, Monk’s work has been presented by BAM, Lincoln Center Festival, Houston Grand Opera, London’s Barbican Centre, and at major venues around the world. She was recently named an Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters by the Republic of France and the 2012 Composer of the Year by *Musical America*. In conjunction with her 50th Season of creating and performing, she was appointed the 2014-15 Richard and Barbara Debs Composer’s Chair at Carnegie Hall. In September 2015, Monk received the National Medal of Arts from President Obama.

In 1968 Monk founded The House, a company dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach to performance. In 1978 she founded Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble to expand her musical textures and forms. As a pioneer in site-specific performance, she has created such works as *Juice: A Theatre Cantata in 3 Installments* (1969) and *Ascension Variations* (2009) for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and *American Archeology #1: Roosevelt Island* (1994). Monk’s award-winning films, including *Ellis Island* (1981) and her first feature, *Book of Days* (1988), have been seen throughout the world. Her music can also be heard in films by such directors as Jean-Luc Godard, David Byrne, and the Coen Brothers. In addition to her numerous vocal pieces, music-theater works and operas, Monk has created vital new repertoire for orchestra, chamber ensembles, and solo instruments, with commissions from Carnegie Hall, Michael Tilson Thomas/San Francisco Symphony and New World Symphony, Kronos Quartet, Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra and Los Angeles Master Chorale, among others.

Since graduating from Sarah Lawrence College in 1964, Monk has received numerous honors including the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” Award, two Guggenheim Fellowships, three Obies (including an award for Sustained Achievement), and two Bessie awards for Sustained Creative Achievement. More recently, Monk was named one of National Public Radio’s 50 Great Voices, and received a 2012 Doris Duke Artist Award, a 2011 Yoko Ono Lennon Courage Award for the Arts, and an inaugural U.S.A. Prudential Fellow award in 2006. She holds honorary Doctor of Arts degrees from Bard College, Boston Conservatory, Cornish College of the Arts, The Juilliard School, Mount Holyoke College, the San Francisco Art Institute and the University of the Arts. Monk has made more than a dozen recordings, most of which are on the ECM New Series label, including the 2008 GRAMMY-nominated *impermanence* and the highly acclaimed *Songs of Ascension* (2011) and *Piano Songs* (2014).

Among the many highlights of Monk's performances from the last twenty years is her *Vocal Offering for His Holiness the Dalai Lama* as part of the World Festival of Sacred Music in Los Angeles in October 1999. Several marathon performances of her work have taken place in New York at the World Financial Center (1991), Lincoln Center Music Festival (2000), Carnegie's Zankel Hall (2005 and 2015), Symphony Space (2008) and the Whitney Museum (2009). In February 2012, Monk was honored with a remix and interpretations cd, *MONK MIX*, featuring 25 artists from the jazz, pop, dj and new music worlds. In March 2012, she premiered *Realm Variations* for six voices and small ensemble, commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony and performed in John Cage's *Song Books* as part of the symphony's American Mavericks Festival. She is the subject of two new books of interviews, *Conversations with Meredith Monk*, by arts critic and *Performing Arts Journal* editor Bonnie Marranca, and *Une voix mystique*, by French author Jean-Louis Tallon. Monk's newest music-theater piece, *On Behalf of Nature*, premiered in January 2013 at UCLA and continues to tour internationally. A recording of the work on ECM Records will be released in 2016.

**Katie Geissinger** has performed with Meredith Monk worldwide in concert and theater pieces such as *ATLAS*, *mercy*, the GRAMMY-nominated *impermanence*, *Songs of Ascension*, and *The Politics of Quiet*, which received a Bessie Award. Career highlights include the premiere of Bang on a Can's Obie-winning *The Carbon Copy Building* (Canteloupe), appearing in Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (Elektra Nonesuch), and performances as a soloist in Bach's *Magnificat*, Honegger's *Le Roi David*, and Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* at Carnegie Hall. Other credits include Jonathan Miller's staging of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at BAM, John Tavener's *The Veil of the Temple* at Lincoln Center, and Ann Hamilton's *the event of a thread*, with music by David Lang, at the Park Avenue Armory. Her Broadway credits include Baz Luhrmann's production of *La Bohème* and *Coram Boy*. Upcoming performances include Julia Wolfe's *Steel Hammer* in collaboration with Anne Bogart's SITI Company and the Bang on a Can All-Stars.

**Bohdan Hilash** has appeared at many of the world's renowned concert venues and festivals as a performer of orchestral, chamber, and contemporary music; opera; musical theatre; and jazz. He has performed with several of the world's leading orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra and New York Philharmonic with conductors such as Leonard Bernstein, Kurt Masur, and Zubin Mehta. Hilash has premiered numerous new compositions written for him throughout the world and worked with many of the field's foremost artists and ensembles including the Bang on a Can All-Stars, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and Continuum. His diverse performance career encompasses projects in jazz and ethnic music, music for radio and television, and numerous recordings and soundtracks for feature films. In the theater Hilash has been a featured performer in collaboration with leading theater companies, playwrights, and directors, including Arthur Miller and Lee Breuer.

**Allison Sniffin** is a multi-instrumentalist, singer, composer, and member of Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble since 1996. She collaborated with Meredith Monk in the orchestration of Monk's *Possible Sky*, *Night*, *WEAVE*, *Realm Variations* and *Backlight*; edited an album of piano music; and prepared numerous *a cappella* and instrumental works for publication. Sniffin has received grants from *Meet the Composer* and the

Concert Artists Guild for her compositions, and has recently composed commissioned works for Melodia Women's Choir and Union Theological Seminary. She is organist and pianist at Middle Collegiate Church and Temple Shaaray Tefila in New York City.

**Noele Stollmack's** scenery and lighting design credits include *The Flying Dutchman*, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, *Albert Herring*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Rio de Sangre*, *Macbeth*, *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Magic Flute* (Florentine Opera); *The Rape of Lucretia* (Toledo Opera); *Pagliacci* (Opera Columbus); *Mirandolina* (Milwaukee Rep); and lighting and scenic realization for Meredith Monk's international tours of *mercy* and *impermanence*. Stollmack's lighting has appeared onstage at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Sydney Opera House, Opera Ontario, Opera Pacific, Portland Opera, Vancouver Opera, New Orleans Opera, Madison Opera, Nashville Opera, American Players Theatre, Milwaukee Rep, Jeff Daniels' Purple Rose Theater and Skylight Music Theatre. As a lighting director for Houston Grand Opera, she supervised lighting for over fifty operas and designed such productions as Andrei Serban's *Elektra*, Dr. Jonathan Miller's *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Aida*, and the world premieres of *Harvey Milk*, *Desert of Roses* and *Dracula Diary*.

**Lucas Indelicato** is pleased to be a part of this program and Meredith Monk's 50th Season. From 2003 to 2006 Indelicato toured as the sound engineer for *mercy* and *impermanence*. His is currently the production audio engineer for the Broadway productions of *Aladdin*, *It's Only a Play* and *Finding Neverland*.



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The Hon. Morton I. and Sheppie  
Abramowitz  
Eve E. Bachrach,  
*In memory of Laurel and Linda Bergold*  
Elena Bloomstein  
Jill D. Brett  
The Caceres-Brown Family,  
*In memory of Beryl A. Brown & Frances Rowan*  
Gerald Cerny  
Edward A. Celarier and Gail Yano  
Lawrence Feinberg  
Ronna and Stanley Foster  
Robertta Gutman, *In memory of David Gutman*  
Margaret F. Hennessey,  
*In memory of Edward Schmeltzer*  
Zona Hostetler  
Eileen Mengers,  
*In memory of Charles and Eileen Mengers*  
George P. Mueller  
Linda Sundberg  
Elaine Suriano  
Ianina J. Tobelmann  
Jan Wolff



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