

CONCEPTS

Monk's songs are wordless, but the sound clusters she uses resemble human conversation

IN PERFORMANCE



Meredith Monk (C) with Andrea Goodman (L) and Monica Solen

Monk's Chant

Sally Banes

Vocal Music by Meredith Monk
The Kitchen, Jan. 24-27

Meredith Monk's music often sounds simple in terms of instrumentation: Her basic strategy is to spin out a single melodic phrase, to repeat and vary it (usually on piano or organ) with a gentle obstinacy. The melodies, in their simplicity and circularity, are reminiscent of lullabies or folk tunes. Yet over this clear,

secure base Monk builds a complex superstructure of vocal adventures — including warbles, ululations, murmurs, wails, drones, tattoos, chirps, hums, sighs, breathy flutters, twangs, falsettos, and bell-like clarity — that derives from years of experimentation, refining images and emotions into musical forms. Her songs are wordless, but because the sound clusters and intonations she uses seem to strikingly resemble human conversation, there is both an emotional content and, often, a charmingly humorous quality in the songs.

For 12 years Monk, who has had classical voice training and as a teenager did a lot of folksinging, has been working with the solo voice — her own. During the past two years, she has taught others her vocal techniques and at the same time composed pieces utilizing the special qualities of their voices. Monk's concert at The Kitchen, comprising the solo "Procession" from *Quarry* (1976), a trio version of three songs from *Vessel* (1971), as well as the more recent *Tablet* (1977), written for three voices, piano, and recorder, and her newest piece, *Dolmen Music* (1979), was a chance to hear nine years' worth of Monk's music.

Dolmen Music, for six voices and cello, seems to mark both an increase in complexity and an inclination towards more conventional composition. The typical Monk dissonances and distortions are woven into the piece, but so subtly and delicately one barely realizes it. The overall impression of the piece is one rich with variety in harmony, melody, texture and

range of pitch. Using three female and three male voices (the singers are Meredith Monk, Andrea Goodman, Monica Solen, Julius Eastman, Robert Een, Paul Langland, and Een also plays cello), Monk alternately separates and unites them, compares and contrasts them, both in terms of formal design and in terms of implicit social meaning.

A dolmen, the program notes explain, is "a prehistoric monument found especially in Britain and France, consisting of two or more stones supporting a horizontal stone slab." Dolmens are thought to be ancient

tombs, my dictionary tells me. A Monk music concert always has theatrical impact, and the way the singers enter to sit in a circle, men on one side and women on the other, the dim, bluish lighting, the way the singers seem to follow a certain protocol in joining or stopping the song, all lend a slightly melancholy, ceremonial, archaic quality to the exquisite performance of *Dolmen Music*.

The piece begins with a faint note played on the cello, sounding as if it comes from very far away, a distant call or a memory. Then one female voice begins a series of sustained tones, with tiny ridges — almost like melodic hiccups — creating slight punctuations. She is joined by another woman, and then the three men sing a deep chant, alternating its sureness with scrambled sounds, semblances of grumbling. Now all six sing in rich counterpoint. Now the women's voices sneak in ornamental variations, and Solen's voice emerges from the group to make *n-n-n-naw* sounds, and then Goodman, enters with open, higher *ah-ah ah-ah* sounds. The piece ends with a loud finale that satisfyingly resolves the contrasts, repeating and weaving together each motif. In the constant alternation and mixing of male-female, low-high, fading-returning, clear-muted-twangy, solo-group, *cappella*-cello, the piece takes on many meanings, sometimes sounding like early church music, sometimes like a Jewish temple service, sometimes like a homespun community gathered around a campfire, sometimes like a lonely shepherd's call, and sometimes like a celestial choir.