



Young People's Chorus of New York City™
-Presents-

RADIO RADIANCE™

BROADCAST LISTENING GUIDE

"Three Heavens and Hells"
by Meredith Monk



Background:

"There are 3 heavens and hells, people heaven and hell, animal heaven and hell, things heaven and hell. What's the difference? There is none."

~Tennessee Reed, Age 11

The text for this piece is taken from *Electric Chocolate* written by Tennessee Reed (whose father is the author Ishmael Reed). Meredith Monk chose **"Three Heavens and Hells,"** written when Tennessee was 11, because it gave her *"space to work with my own rhythms and phonemes as well as an intriguing set of images to play with. I've always believed that the voice itself is a language, which speaks more eloquently than words."* This is Meredith Monk's first composition using words (she has historically only worked with the voice without text).

"Since 1965, I have been composing music for the voice as an instrument. I've always believed that the voice itself is a language, which speaks more eloquently than words. But when my friend Carla Blank, who co-directed the children's dance troupe of Roberts + Blank Dance Theatre asked me to create music composed to children's poetry, I became intrigued by the idea of setting music to text. Carla gave me a book of poems entitled *Electric Chocolate* written by her daughter, Tennessee Reed. I chose **"Three Heavens and Hells,"**





written when Tennessee was 11, because it gave me space to work with my own rhythms and phonemes as well as an intriguing set of images to play with. I thought the poem was both whimsical and profound. For example, what would 'Things heaven and hell' be like? I just let my imagination fly.

"Though I originally scored "**Three Heavens and Hells**" for four female voices, I always wanted it to be sung by a children's chorus. When the Young People's Chorus of New York City™ commissioned me to write a piece, I was excited by the idea of making a new form with the material. Working with Francisco Núñez and the young singers has given me the opportunity to create different colors and textures, expand my original conception and develop it into a new entity."

--Meredith Monk

Meredith Monk is a composer, singer, director/choreographer and creator of new opera, music theater works, films and installations. 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 in an effort to discover and weave together new modes of perception. Her groundbreaking 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 we have no words. During a career that spans more than 40 years, the MacArthur "Genius" Award recipient has been acclaimed by audiences and critics as a major creative force in the performing arts.

The composer's goals in creating her composition:

- To compose new music that will expand, enlarge and innovate the voice and the ways in which the voice is used as an instrument





- To create and portray “whimsical, intriguing images” that will resonate with young people
- To guide children towards learning music in a natural, organic way that helps them explore their creativity. To have the music take listeners on a journey of IMAGINATION.

Lesson Plan for Teachers:



Aim:

To introduce students to the newly commissioned work “**Three Heavens and Hells**” as a means for exploring the concept of “**Making Magic Out of Nothing.**” To explore how the voice can be pushed to its limits and extended in different ways to add imagery and texture to words and sounds.



Objective:

Students will be able to:

- Recognize the same words of the poem “**Three Heavens and Hells**” by Tennessee Reed that they heard in the Pre-Broadcast Lesson in Meredith Monk’s composition.
- Identify ways the spoken poem is enhanced when it is put to music on the broadcast.
- Identify other sounds beyond the words in the piece and consider how those sounds were made and what they bring to the composition.
- Recognize that the voice may be extended in different ways to evoke different images (for example, does the voice change when it is singing about “animal heaven and hell” vs. “things heaven and hell”?).
- Understand that different vocal sounds may be layered on top of one another or added to a composition in other ways to create another layer of complexity to the



piece.

- Understand that music can be created out of nearly nothing – that is to say – out of a limited number of words, phonemes and sounds combined in a unique form (***making magic out of nothing***).



The Lesson and In-Class Activities

Engaging your class:

1. Ask your students to think about what they've learned in the pre-broadcast lesson regarding the voice and some of the different ways in which it can be used to affect both the words it speaks and sounds it makes. Ask your students to think about how far the voice can be stretched, extended or used to full capacity to create images and ideas and to tell stories. Remind students of the following:

The composer Meredith Monk has said that:

"within the human voice there is color, texture, landscape and an inherent power..."

2. Ask your students the following questions:
 - What do you think the composer meant by that?
 - Do words have color? If so, what makes them have color? Give an example.
 - Is it the way the voice puts sounds to a rhythm? Is it the way the voice repeats certain sounds? Is it the way the voice emphasizes or exaggerates certain consonants or vowels or the range of notes a voice can reach?
 - How far can the voice be extended in different ways to create new music, new ideas and new images? What are some examples of what the voice can do?



3. Model some examples of vocal extensions for your students and write the word "phoneme" on the board. Provide an example of what a phoneme is.

Phoneme – distinguishing speech sound: a speech sound that distinguishes one word from another, e.g. the sounds "d" and "t" in the words "bid" and "bit." A phoneme is the smallest phonetic unit that can carry meaning.¹

4. Explain to your students that in this lesson they are going to listen to the broadcast of "**Three Heavens and Hells**," then divide into groups to perform the poem. Each group will use vocal extensions to interpret the poem and perform it for the class. After all the performances, lead the class in a discussion and have students explore react to the different interpretations and how they affected the overall work.

The Lesson:

Part 1: Students listen to the WNYC broadcast performance (Listening #1) and then practice using their own voices to create sounds for their own version of "**Three Heavens and Hells**."

Listen to the Broadcast:

1. Before the broadcast write the following questions on the board and instruct your students to consider them as they listen:
 - How many voices are there?
 - How does having multiple voices affect the work?
 - Do the voices create any imagery? Give examples.
 - What role does rhythm play in the piece?
 - How are phonemes emphasized (or not) in the piece?

Students Practice Their Own Sounds:

¹ "Phoneme," Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia. <http://encarta.msn.com> © 1993-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.



2. After the broadcast, divide your class into three sections, assigning to each a phrase from the poem. Group 1 would be "Things Heaven and Hell", Group 2 would be "People Heaven and Hell", and Group 3 would be "Animal Heaven and Hell".
3. Ask each group to work together to interpret their individual phrase with sounds they make up. Ask them to make up vocal sounds – one for the "heaven" aspect of their assigned word and one for the "hell" aspect.
 - For example, does "Animal Hell" sound like a day at the zoo with all kinds of animals making their respective sounds in a cacophonous unison?
 - Does "Animal Heaven" on the contrary sound like voices in unison but in a peaceful, melodic combination of sounds?
 - Does "Things Heaven" sound like inanimate objects coming to life in a beautiful dance?
 - By comparison, does "Things Hell" sound like an inventor's lab with mechanical contraptions in disorderly chaos?
4. Ask each group to then perform their sounds for the other groups to hear.
5. Have a class discussion to discuss how they used their voices differently to create their sounds. What kinds of techniques did they employ to "get the most" out of their voices?

Part 2: Students listen to the interviews with the composer.

1. Have students listen to the interview with Meredith Monk
 - Visit <http://www.ypc.org/TransientGlory/RadioRadiance> to listen



2. After your students have listened to the interview ask your students the following questions:
 - What did you learn from the composer?
 - How did Meredith Monk’s discussion of her work inform your understanding of what form is?
 - What did you think of her explanation about how the voice can be extended beyond its normal limits to create new and different sounds?

Part 3: Students go back and listen to the performance a second time.

1. Have students listen to the performance a second time, after having heard the interview with the composer.
2. After your students have listened a second time, ask them the following question:
 - Did your response to the music change after hearing what the composer had to say?
 - Did the music seem different after learning more background from the composer?

Post-Broadcast Activity:

1. Ask your students to write a short essay about their response to hearing Meredith Monk’s piece “***Three Heavens and Hells.***” Ask them to answer the following questions within their essay:
 - What images come to mind after hearing this piece of music?
 - Describe how you think the voices were “pushed to their limits” in this work.
 - How do you think using the voice in different ways contributed to the different images you have of the three heavens and hells and of the poem overall?



Summary and Wrap-up:



Reinforce the following:

- The voice is an instrument that has tremendous capability. The voice can be pushed to its limits by expanding its form through dynamics, imitation, the breath, vocal technique and use of text or phonemes.
- The voice can create imagery within a musical composition using the above tools.



National Standards:

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
2. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments.
3. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.
4. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
5. Evaluating music and music performances.
6. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.



Explore More about Meredith Monk and Vocal Extended Technique at These Sites:

1. Meredith Monk's web site:



<http://www.meredithmonk.org/>

2. Chanting to the Beat of a Different Drummer: *WNYC Soundcheck Episode on Meredith Monk*

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/soundcheck/episodes/2003/09/11>

3. Sacred Sundays: Meredith Monk: *WNYC Evening Music Episode on Meredith Monk*

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/eveningmusic/episodes/2008/12/07>

4. WNYC Evening Music: *Vocal Extended Technique*

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/eveningmusic/episodes/2008/12>

5. WNYC New Sounds: *Vocal Extended Technique*

<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/newsounds/episodes/2004/04/25>