



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

RADIO RADIANCE™

PRE-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.

This listening guide introduces **form** as an example of organized sound in music and challenges students to consider what music really is as they learn about what happens when sounds are combined. This guide also introduces and defines the term "**vocal extreme**" as a foundation for teaching students the specific **vocal extreme** of **extending the voice by pushing it beyond its limits**.

Lesson Plan for Teachers:

 Aim:





For us as a pre-broadcast lesson, to prepare students to listen to the piece “**Three Heavens and Hells**” by Meredith Monk by introducing the original poem by the same name. To introduce the words and form of this poem as an example of a spoken, verbal rhythm and as a basis for comparison to hearing the influence of the voice and extended vocal technique on the poem when it is put to music.



Objective:

Students will be able to:

- Understand what the term **form** means in *poetry*, compared to **form** in *music*.
- Understand that words may be combined in a specific form to create a verbal “rhythm” that may be further expanded by the voice
- Understand that when words are combined to form a poem they take on a texture and a rhythm from this form which defines it.
- Define the following terms: **Phoneme, form, rhythm, image**

Materials Needed:

- A copy of the poem “**Three Heavens and Hells**” by Tennessee Reed.



The Lesson and In-Class Activities

Engaging your class:

1. Open a class discussion by telling your students the following:
 - Words when combined into the form of poetry have the power to express ideas and images.



2. Ask your students the following questions:
 - When you read a poem what comes to mind?
 - Do you see pictures or images in your mind?
 - Do you think the voice can affect or change the images we “imagine” by the different ways in which it is used (different sounds, rhythms etc.)?
3. Explain to your students that in this lesson they are going to read a poem, first silently then out loud after which they will listen to a broadcast of the same poem put to music. After the broadcast they will examine the ways in which the voice differs between the spoken poem and the poem as it is performed by young choral voices.

The Lesson:

1. Distribute a copy of the poem “*Three Heavens and Hells*” to your class.
2. Ask the students in your class to read the poem silently.
3. Write the following key terms on the board and ask for volunteers to define each term:
 - *Image*
 - *Rhythm*
 - *Form*
4. Ask your students to free-associate about this poem and call upon them individually to answer the following questions:
 - What do you think the poem is about and why?
 - When you read the poem are there images or pictures that come to mind and why?
 - When you read the poem do you think the words mean the same thing to each person who reads it?
 - Is there a rhythm to the poem? If so, what is the rhythm?
 - Does the poem have a structure or pattern?



5. Ask for a student volunteer to read the poem out loud, putting voice to the poem. After the reading ask your students the following questions:
 - What happens to the poem when it is read out loud?
 - Does something change from when you read it silently? Why or why not?
 - Do you think the voice adds or subtracts something from what you read?

6. Now ask another student to read the poem out loud adding his or her own interpretation (emphasizing words or sounds in his or her own way). Then ask the class the following questions:
 - How did Barbara's reading of the poem differ from Johnny's reading? Why were the two readings different? (*Highlight that each person brought a different voice, a different sound, and a different interpretation to the poem.*)
 - Did each reading have a different rhythm or the same rhythm? Did they each read at the same pace – as fast as each other? As slow as each other?
 - How does the voice affect the rhythm of this poem? Does the voice add to this rhythm? Can a voice create its own rhythm?

7. Now ask both students to read the poem out loud together at the same time once. Then ask the students to read the poem out loud together and repeat it three times. Then ask the class the following questions:
 - *How does the poem sound when there are multiple voices reading it together? How is it changed?*
 - *How does the poem sound when it is repeated? Are there differences between each reading?*
 - *When read three different ways, three different times does it create different images?*



Summary and Wrap-up:

1. Repeat the question asked at the beginning of the lesson:



- Do you think the voice can affect or change the meanings of words or the images that words evoke by the different ways in which it is used (different sounds, rhythms etc.)?

2. Then reinforce the following:

- When words are combined into the form of poetry they have the power to express ideas and images.
- This **form** has its own rhythm which can be changed or expanded when put to music
- The voice adds its own effect to words, changing them, giving them texture and color to create new images.