

musicalamerica

WORLDWIDE

Meredith Monk, 2.0

November 3, 2020

By Clive Paget

With public performances remaining severely curtailed, not to mention the travel bans still in place, frustrated artists are finding new ways to communicate, often using newly available technology for remote, real-time collaborations. Meredith Monk and John Hollenbeck—a pair of artists used to falling between the cracks of conventional practice—are no exception and *Duet Behavior 2020*, streamed October 28 by Bang on a Can and the Noguchi Museum in Queens, was an intriguing example of where they might be headed. At just shy of 20 minutes of music it was a fairly brief affair, but in some ways, it marked a step forward in these COVID-stricken times.

As collaborators, Monk and Hollenbeck go back 20 years or so, their friendship and mutual respect a tangible element to these video excerpts filmed and edited by Monk's own House Foundation for the Arts. When Noguchi Museum's Big Ears Festival was cancelled, the New York-based multi-disciplinary composer, singer, director, choreographer—call her what you will—and the Montreal-resident cross-genre composer and percussionist decided not to let a tiny thing like 600 kilometers get in their way. Hollenbeck's suggestion that they explore a series of duets set them about thinking how to make music together online instead. Enter Jamulus, a free to download software tool with a worldwide network of servers that allows collaborators to hook up over normal broadband connections in high quality, low latency sound (i.e. with pretty much undetectable delays).



John Hollenbeck backs Meredith Monk in the live stream Duet Behavior 2020

Monk has a catalogue stretching back 50 years and *Duet Behavior 2020* involves Hollenbeck opening up old forms through arrangements for voice and percussion in order to create something new. As he explained in a watch-party with Noguchi Museum Director Brett Littman after the event, the jazz-influenced percussionist approached five familiar Monk pieces by imagining that she was improvising. Freeing up his response, he aimed to create something fresh that captured something primal in the originals.

With Zoom providing the fairly basic visuals, each musician was snugly headphoned in his or her respective music room, the imagery varying from simple two-box juxtapositions to a more involving montage where a pair of superimposed phantom images seemed to coalesce to form a single musical being. However, it was the richness and depth of sound that stood out, a combination of high-quality recording equipment and Jamulus's tightly synchronized audio interface. With Monk's voice retaining much of its bloom and all of its charm—you'd never guess she is now 77—Hollenbeck's subtle interweaving of a wide range of percussion instruments and the occasional bit of electronics made for plenty of variety.

Opening with “Wa-Lie-oh” from Monk’s iconic *Songs from the Hill*, Hollenbeck deployed a battery of different sticks and brushes on drum kit and cymbals, as well as the occasional recourse to elbow on drum skin, to underpin Monk’s joyous whoops. With arms floating and soaring in space as she rattled through her syllabic lyric, there was plenty of the old vocal magic. *Little Breath Motor 2* was an interesting experiment where live percussion blended with Monk’s equally percussive intakes of breath. Passing a microphone on a wand over a collection of cymbals, Hollenbeck supported the voice with a rumbling wash of electronics.

Upping the ante

In other numbers Hollenbeck’s contributions felt more interventionist. In *Insect Descending*, for example, his drumkit riffs and dragged bell tree lent a rock and roll vibe, giving a rhythmic fillip to Monk’s gestural movements and merging with her array of high-pitched vocals. *Harp and Bow* offered the closest of interactions with Monk on mouth harp and Hollenbeck on berimbau, a bowed, single-string Brazilian percussion instrument originally from Africa. The complex web of interlocking rhythms—especially when Monk slipped extra vocalizations into the gaps between the twanging of her harp—made for a unique and occasionally funky sonic blend.

The set went out on a high with “Happy Woman” from 2018’s *Cellular Songs*. A paean to female diversity, the lyric offers up a succession of adjectives—hungry, sassy, patient, thieving, grieving etc.—in between vocalized choruses with Monk shimmying and shaking, arms oscillating amidst the frequent bursts of finger-wriggling. Hollenbeck’s choice of mellow vibraphone was the perfect way to ground the music while losing none of its natural positivity and uplift.

In the post-show chat, Hollenbeck confessed to enjoying time in lockdown to do something that he doesn’t usually have time to do—i.e. practice. Monk, on the other hand, admitted to being busier than ever. “As an artist I feel it’s important to keep the process of making work going,” she said, owning a sense of responsibility to go out and inspire others. It may not beat live, but *Duet Behavior 2020* is a solution of sorts for now.

Meredith Monk was [Musical America's 2012 Composer of the Year](#)

<https://www.musicalamerica.com/news/newsstory.cfm?storyid=46351&categoryid=4&archived=0>