

# Concert Program for March 13, 2010

David Robertson, conductor  
Members of Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble\*  
Members of the Saint Louis Symphony Chorus  
Amy Kaiser, director

**STRAVINSKY** *Monumentum pro Gesualdo di Venosa*  
(1882-1971) *ad CD Annum* (1960)  
“Asciugate i begli occhi,” Madrigale XIV,  
libro quinto  
“Ma tu, cagion di quella,” Madrigale XVIII,  
libro quinto  
“Belta poi che t’assenti,” Madrigale II, libro sesto

**MEREDITH MONK** *Panda Chant II* (1984)  
(b. 1942)  
Meredith Monk\* and Allison Sniffin\*, sopranos  
Katie Geissinger\*, mezzo-soprano  
Thomas Bogdan\*, tenor  
Theo Bleckmann\*, baritone  
Members of the Saint Louis Symphony Chorus  
Amy Kaiser, director

**MEREDITH MONK/** *New Work* (2009-10, World Premiere)  
**orch. M. Monk/A. Sniffin**  
Katie Geissinger\*, mezzo-soprano  
Theo Bleckmann\*, baritone  
Members of the Saint Louis Symphony Chorus  
Amy Kaiser, director

Intermission

**MEREDITH MONK/** *Night* (1996, rev. 2005)  
**orch. A. Sniffin**  
**with M. Monk**

Allison Sniffin\* and Marella Briones, sopranos  
Katie Geissinger\* and Debby Lennon, altos  
Tom Bogdan\* and Brendan Hemmerle, tenors  
Theo Bleckmann\* and Derrick Fox, baritones

**BARTÓK** **Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta** (1936)  
(1881-1945) Andante tranquillo  
Allegro  
Adagio  
Allegro molto

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David Robertson is the Beofor Music Director and Conductor.

Amy Kaiser is the AT&T Foundation Chair.

Tonight's concert is underwritten in part by a generous gift from Mrs. Emily R. Pulitzer.

Meredith Monk's *Night* and *New Work* are part of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra's Living Composers Series, which is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Meredith Monk's *New Work* is jointly commissioned by Grand Center, Inc. and Los Angeles

Master Chorale, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Meet the Composer, and the Argosy Foundation.

Tonight's concert is part of the Wells Fargo Advisors Orchestral Series.



MICHAEL T. MORROW

## David Robertson Beofor Music Director and Conductor

American conductor David Robertson is a compelling and passionate communicator whose stimulating ideas and exhilarating music-making produce riveting performances, captivating and inspiring international audiences and musicians alike. Hailed by the press as a brilliant artist and master programmer, he is considered one of today's most important conductors. His consummate musicianship, fresh stylistic instincts, and extensive mastery of orchestral as well as operatic repertoire have secured strong relationships for him with major orchestras worldwide. Robertson is currently in his fifth season as Music Director of the 130-year-old Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, while continuing as Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, a post he has held since 2005.

Highlights of Robertson's 2009-10 season with the SLSO included a successful fall tour to Carnegie Hall, with a four-city California spring tour to come. Guest engagements in the U.S. include performances with the San Francisco Symphony, Chicago Symphony, and New York Philharmonic, where Robertson is a regular guest conductor, as well as the Cleveland Orchestra. Internationally, he returns to conduct the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra at the Edinburgh Festival, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Staatskapelle Dresden, Berlin Philharmonic, Bayerischer Rundfunk Symphonieorchester, Israel Philharmonic, and Sydney Symphony among others.

Robertson has made numerous recordings, including, with the SLSO, the first-ever recording of John Adams's *Doctor Atomic* Symphony and *Guide to Strange Places* for Nonesuch. Robertson's and the SLSO's download-only "Live from Powell Hall" releases include works by Adams, Scriabin, and Szymanowski.

Born in Santa Monica, California, Robertson was educated at London's Royal Academy of Music, where he studied French horn and composition before turning to orchestral conducting. Robertson received Columbia University's 2006 Ditson Conductor's Award, and he and the SLSO are recipients of two major awards from ASCAP and the League of American Orchestras: the 2008-09 Award for Programming of Contemporary Music, and the 2005-06 Morton Gould Award for Innovative Programming. Musical America named Robertson Conductor of the Year for 2000. In 1997, he received the Seaver/National Endowment for the Arts Conductors Award, the premier prize of its kind, given to exceptionally gifted American conductors. He is the recipient of honorary doctorates from Webster University and Maryville University. David Robertson and his wife, pianist Orli Shaham, are parents of twin boys. Robertson also has two teenage sons.



## Meredith Monk

Meredith Monk is a composer, singer, and creator of new opera and music theater works. A pioneer in what is now called “extended vocal technique” and “interdisciplinary performance,” Monk has been hailed as a “magician of the voice,” and “one of America’s coolest composers.” 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.

Monk has received numerous awards, including the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” Award in 1995, two Guggenheim Fellowships, a Brandeis Creative Arts Award, three Obies (including an award for Sustained Achievement), two Villager Awards, and two “Bessie” Awards for Sustained Creative Achievement. In 2006 she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and named a United States Artists Fellow. Her music has also been heard in numerous films, including *La Nouvelle Vague* by Jean-Luc Godard and *The Big Lebowski* by Joel and Ethan Coen. In 2000, Monk began a publishing relationship with Boosey & Hawkes, making her scores, including the recently released *Piano Album*, available to the public.

In 1965 Monk began her innovative exploration of the voice as a multi-faceted instrument and subsequently composed and performed many solo pieces for unaccompanied voice and voice/keyboard. In 1978 she formed Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble to further expand her musical textures and forms.

Monk’s first orchestra piece, *Possible Sky*, was commissioned by Michael Tilson Thomas for the New World Symphony and premiered in April 2003 in Miami. In November 2005, Monk’s 40th year of performing and creating new music was celebrated by a four-hour marathon at Zankel Hall with performances by Björk, Bang on a Can All-Stars, DJ Spooky, John Zorn, and the Roches, among others. Another marathon, *Meredith Monk Music @ the Whitney* was presented at the Whitney Museum in 2009, followed by the site-specific *Ascension Variations* at the Guggenheim Museum featuring over 120 performers. Monk’s CD *impermanence* was released on the ECM label in March 2008 and nominated for a 2008 Grammy Award. *Beginnings*, a collection of her archival recordings from 1966-80 was recently released on the Tzadik label. Her new music-theater work, *Songs of Ascension*, which premiered in October 2008, was performed at BAM’s Next Wave Festival in October 2009, and is currently touring internationally.

Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble debuts with the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra this evening.

## Theo Bleckmann

A jazz singer and new music composer of eclectic tastes and prodigious gifts, Grammy-nominated Theo Bleckmann makes music that is accessibly sophisticated, unsentimentally emotional, and seriously playful, leading his work to be described as “from another planet” (*New York Times*), as “magical, futuristic,” (*AllAboutJazz*), “limitless” (*Philadelphia Citypaper*) “transcendent” (*Village Voice*) and “brilliant” (*New York* magazine). Bleckmann has released a series of gorgeous and irreverent albums on Winter & Winter, including recordings of Las Vegas standards, of Berlin Kabarett, and of popular “bar songs” (all with pianist Fumio Yasuda), a recording of newly-arranged songs by Charles Ives (with jazz/rock collective Kneebody), and his upcoming acoustic Solos for Voice and Toys, *I dwell in possibility*. Bleckmann has additionally collaborated with musicians and composers, including Laurie Anderson, Philip Glass, John Hollenbeck, Sheila Jordan, Phil Kline, David Lang, Kirk Nurock, Ben Monder, Michael Tilson Thomas, Julia Wolfe, John Zorn, the Bang on a Can All-stars, and, most prominently, Meredith Monk, with whom Bleckmann worked as a core ensemble member for 15 years. He has recently been interviewed by Terry Gross on NPR’s *Fresh Air*. Learn more about the artist at [www.TheoBleckmann.com](http://www.TheoBleckmann.com)

## Tom Bogdan

Tom Bogdan sings a broad spectrum of music and has received critical acclaim for performances ranging from opera to cabaret. He first performed with Meredith Monk in *ATLAS: an opera in 3 parts* and has been a member of her Vocal Ensemble since 1990. Monk wrote *New York Requiem* especially for him and he has performed it in New York and throughout Eastern Europe. He has participated in the premieres of more than 50 new works. Crossing many musical boundaries, his eclectic cabaret shows have delighted critics and audiences alike and his *L’Amour Bleu*, a musical masque on gay themes, was produced by the Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church in New York City for three seasons in a row. Among his many recording credits, Bogdan appears on a recently released CD of works by Stravinsky singing the composer’s Cantata, with Robert Craft conducting. Bogdan is a Fulbright Scholar, and received a grant to teach Meredith Monk’s music in Hungary. He currently teaches voice at Bennington College in Vermont.

## Katie Geissinger

Katie Geissinger has been working with Meredith Monk since 1990, in concert and in pieces such as *ATLAS*, *The Politics of Quiet* (for which she is a Bessie recipient), *mercy*, and the Grammy-nominated *impermanence*. She premiered the Bang on a Can/Ridge Theater/Ben Katchor collaboration *The*

*Carbon Copy Building*, an Obie-winner that was released on Cantaloupe, and performed in the world tour of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (Elektra Nonesuch), which was recently revived in concert at Carnegie Hall. Other Carnegie Hall appearances include Bach's *Magnificat* with the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the Witch in Honegger's *Le Roi David*, and Golijov's *Ainadamar*. Geissinger has performed on Broadway, in Baz Luhrmann's production of *La bohème* and in *Coram Boy*, and off-Broadway in many Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Other appearances at BAM include Jonathan Miller's staged productions of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Geissinger recently returned from the workshop of Philip Miller's *The Hottentot Venus* at MASSMoCA.

## Allison Sniffin

Multi-instrumentalist, singer, composer, and member of Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble since 1996, Allison Sniffin has performed in *The Politics of Quiet*, *A Celebration Service*, *Magic Frequencies*, *mercy*, *Turtle Dreams*, *Book of Days*, and *impermanence*. In addition to performing in Monk's Ensemble, she has engraved, prepared or orchestrated a number of Monk's works including *Possible Sky*, *Stringsongs*, and *Night*, and edited a book of her piano music. A recipient of awards from Meet the Composer and Concert Artists' Guild, Sniffin's music has been performed by New York Philharmonic-based duo Lambchops and by the Metamorphosis Orchestra. With a grant from Open Meadows Foundation she was commissioned by Melodia Women's Choir of NYC to create a work based on the writings of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, which premiered at Merkin Hall in New York in November 2006.



## Amy Kaiser AT&T Foundation Chair

One of the country's leading choral directors, Amy Kaiser has conducted the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra in Handel's *Messiah*, Schubert's Mass in E flat, Vivaldi's *Gloria*, and sacred works by Haydn and Mozart as well as Young People's Concerts. She has made eight appearances as guest conductor for the Berkshire Choral Festival in Sheffield, Massachusetts, Santa Fe, and at Canterbury Cathedral. As Music Director of the Dessoff Choirs in New York for 12 seasons, she conducted many performances of major works at Lincoln Center. Other conducting engagements include concerts at Chicago's Grant Park Music Festival and more than fifty performances with the Metropolitan Opera Guild. Principal Conductor of the New York Chamber Symphony's School Concert Series for seven seasons, Kaiser also led many programs for the 92nd Street Y's acclaimed *Schubertiade*. She has conducted over twenty-five operas, including eight contemporary premieres.

A frequent collaborator with Professor Peter Schickele on his annual PDQ Bach concerts at Carnegie Hall, Kaiser made her Carnegie Hall debut conducting PDQ Bach's Consort of Choral Christmas Carols. She also led the Professor in PDQ Bach's Canine Cantata "Wachet Arf" with the New Jersey Symphony.

Kaiser recently led master classes in choral conducting at Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, served as faculty for a conducting workshop with Chorus America and as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts. An active guest speaker, Kaiser teaches monthly classes for adults in symphonic and operatic repertoire and presents PreConcert Perspectives at Powell Hall.

Kaiser has prepared choruses for the New York Philharmonic, the Ravinia Festival, the Mostly Mozart Festival, and Opera Orchestra of New York. She also served as faculty conductor and vocal coach at the Manhattan School of Music and the Mannes College of Music. An alumna of Smith College, she was awarded the Smith College Medal for outstanding professional achievement.

## Members of the Saint Louis Symphony Chorus

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Leon Burke III

*Assistant Director*

Gail Hintz

*Accompanist*

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Richard Ashburner

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Brendan Hemmerle

Ellen Henschen

Gretchen Hewitt

Debby Lennon

Kellen Markovich

Jan Marra

Scott Meidroth

Caroline Miller

Robert Reed

Kate Reimann

Greg Riddle

Patti Ruff Riggle

Elizabeth Schleicher

David Stephens

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Allison Wamser

Nicole C. Weiss

Christopher Wise

# The Thrill of the New

BY PAUL SCHIAVO

## *Ideas at Play*

During the early years of the last century, winds of change blew strongly through Western music, as they did also through painting, literature, and dance. Propelled by the spirit of modernity, with its sense of new possibilities and freedoms, composers re-thought old assumptions about harmony and other facets of their art. Although the musical experiments of the most daring composers disconcerted some listeners, others found them thrilling. For those brave souls it was joyous to discover new sounds and modes of musical discourse, to sense new worlds of aural experience coming into being.

The delight in new musical discoveries is, of course, still with us. The work of Stravinsky and Bartók, two of the giants of early modernism, is still fresh. Even more exciting is the chance to hear for the first time a major composition by Meredith Monk, one of the most original and accomplished creative musicians of our day.

## Igor Stravinsky *Monumentum pro Gesualdo di Venosa* *ad CD Annum*

**Born:** Oranienbaum, Russia, June 17, 1882 **Died:** New York, April 6, 1971  
**First performance:** September 27, 1960, in Venice, under the direction of the composer **SLSO premiere:** October 21, 2006, Nicholas McGegan conducting the only previous SLSO performance **Scoring:** Two oboes, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, and strings **Performance time:** Approximately seven minutes



Stravinsky

**In Context** 1960 *Rebel forces led by Fidel Castro transform Cuba into a Communist state; John F. Kennedy narrowly defeats Richard Nixon to become 35th U.S. president; Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho premieres*

Igor Stravinsky first came to international prominence as an apostle of a particular kind of modernism. In 1913 the composer's ballet *The Rite of Spring* disconcerted listeners with its savage rhythms and jarring discords, prompting a riotous disruption of the work's first performance. That event cemented Stravinsky's reputation as a seminal modernist. Rightly or wrongly, he and his music became indelibly linked in the public mind with what the art critic Robert Hughes called "the shock of the new."

Stravinsky did espouse musical innovation and remained a highly inventive composer over the whole of his long career. However, he also

maintained a fertile relation with music of past centuries. In many of his works Stravinsky adopted compositional forms, textures, and melodic gestures typical of past centuries, fusing them with modern rhythms and harmonies. In the ballets *Pulcinella* and *The Fairy's Kiss* he strikingly reworked material by older composers, updating them in imaginative ways; and his remarkable arrangement of Bach's Chorale Variations on *Vom Himmel hoch* changed that work through subtle variations of rhythm and texture, as well as with some very original instrumental colors.

Much the same can be said of Stravinsky's orchestral transcription of three madrigals by the Renaissance composer Carlo Gesualdo. Written in 1960 to mark the 400th anniversary of Gesualdo's birth, *Monumentum pro Gesualdo di Venosa ad CD Annum* shows Stravinsky's creative dialogue with the musical past continuing to be vital late in his career.

Gesualdo is not the most famous Italian composer of his time, but he was surely the most infamous: When he discovered his wife in bed with another man, Gesualdo killed them both in a jealous rage. He escaped criminal prosecution, but the resulting scandal prompted Gesualdo to retire to his estate. There he grew increasingly melancholy and reclusive, taking pleasure, it seems, only in composing music.

Gesualdo wrote sacred songs and litanies, but most of his work, and the most important, is contained in his many madrigals, songs for several voices based on secular poetry. His early madrigals are fairly conventional—or, at least, not too very unconventional. But over time Gesualdo's composing grew ever more unusual, with odd and angular melodic contours, irregular phrase lengths, and eccentric harmonies. It is, of course, precisely these idiosyncratic qualities that appealed to Stravinsky, who praised Gesualdo as “one of the most personal and most original composers ever born.”

**The Music:** *Monumentum pro Gesualdo* is more than just an orchestration of music originally written for voices. Particularly in the first madrigal, “*Asciugate i begli occhi*,” Stravinsky freely altered Gesualdo's composition to avoid symmetrical phrasing and harmonic repetition. But throughout the work—even in the second and third madrigals, where he did little to alter the original lines and rhythms—his very personal manner of instrumentation has the effect of bringing this old Italian music into the modern era.

## Meredith Monk *Panda Chant II, New Work, Night*

**Born:** New York, November 20, 1942 **Now resides:** New York **First performances:** *Panda Chant II:* October 1984, in New York, as part of a production of *The Games* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music **New Work:** receiving its world premiere this evening **Night:** November 6, 2005, at Zankel Hall in New York, performed by the ensemble Alarm Will Sound and guests, with Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble **SLSO premieres:** All three works receive their SLSO premieres this evening

***Panda Chant II* Scoring:** Unaccompanied chorus **Performance time:** Approximately two minutes

***New Work* Scoring:** Solo mezzo-soprano and baritone, chorus, and an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes and English horn; two clarinets and bass clarinet; two bassoons, two horns, trumpet and flugelhorn, tenor trombone, harp, two pianos and celesta, percussion (two marimbas, two vibraphones, xylophone), and strings **Performance time:** Approximately 25 minutes

***Night* Scoring:** Eight voices and an orchestra of flute, alto flute and piccolo; oboe and English horn; three clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, contra-alto clarinet, and contrabass clarinet; soprano saxophone and alto saxophone, bassoon, horn, trumpet and flugelhorn, trombone; harp, bowed psaltery, and accordion; piano, celesta, and synthesizer; percussion, and strings **Performance time:** Approximately 23 minutes

### In Context: Meredith Monk

During the first half of the 20th century, Stravinsky and Bartók effected revolutionary changes in the way we conceive and experience music. Although their innovations provoked controversy during their lifetimes, their work has gained widespread acceptance and has entered the repertoires of orchestras and other performers. Moreover, their pioneering spirits have inspired subsequent generations of composers who, like the early modernist masters, have pursued their own musical pathways.

One such composer is Meredith Monk, whose music provides the central part of our concert. The designation “composer,” however, requires qualification, for Monk has been, over the course of a career that now spans four decades, considerably more than a composer. She is, in addition, a singer and creator of new vocal sounds, a theater artist, dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker. These diverse aspects of Monk’s work are by no means isolated or eclectic forays into different modes of expression. On the contrary, everything this artist has done is linked by a singular vision and sensibility, and nearly always is rooted in her highly original approach to the human voice.

Meredith Monk began exploring new concepts of vocal sound during the mid-1960s. In her early pieces, she typically set her own singing against a spare accompaniment of keyboard or other instruments, sometimes multiplying her voice by means of tape recording and playback. Soon she began writing for groups of singers, whom she trained in her own unique style of vocal production.

Monk uses voices like instruments. Often her music entails wordless chanting, or singing syllables unconnected to any known language. Her music is generally characterized by static harmonies and repetition and incremental variation of brief melodic patterns. Although these traits are shared by the school of American “minimalist” composers (Steve Reich and Philip Glass, among others), Monk states that she came to this mode of writing by way of folk music. There is, indeed, a sort of folkloric quality to some of Monk’s music, though not one that we can associate with any particular culture.

Rather, Monk’s music tends to convey an otherworldly impression. The composer has spoken of her desire to create a timeless music, free from historical associations. Often her vocal compositions have about them a mysterious sense of ritual. That last quality prompted, and no doubt was prompted by, her work in the theater and with dance. Early in her career Monk began blending her music with movement, scenic tableaux, and film to create highly original, often dream-like, theatrical works—operas of a new and different sort.

### ***Panda Chant II***

*Panda Chant II* originated with a music-theater piece, *The Games*, for which Meredith Monk composed music and collaborated with the director Ping Chong on scenario and choreography. This piece reveals the salient aspects of Monk’s vocal music. Its text is composed of syllables divorced from syntactical context or meaning. The music is highly rhythmic and evolves through the layering, repetition, and gradual change of brief melodic phrases.

### ***New Work***

Meredith Monk has pursued her career outside what we might call the concert-music establishment. For years she worked primarily with her own cadre of singers, augmented by musicians playing various keyboards, strings, percussion, and similar instruments. But inevitably her talent attracted notice among more conventionally oriented musicians. In 2003 she composed *Possible Sky*, her first orchestral piece, to a commission from Michael Tilson Thomas’s New World Symphony Orchestra. This evening we are privileged to hear a new composition, commissioned by Grand Center Inc., and the Los Angeles Master Chorale.

## Monk

This work, which was completed but not yet titled at the time these notes went to press, is the first Monk has written for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra. But not just the size of its scoring represents an advance into new territory. The composer notes that, in the past, she has constructed long works by linking discreet, clearly defined sections. Here, by contrast, the music presents what Monk describes as “a continuous woven form,” in which musical ideas “evolve, branch out, and circle back around” in an organic flow.

The composer notes three main thematic elements. The first is a bell-like figure built on just three pitches; it is heard at the outset, where it is scored for voices only. This gives way to a chant-like subject in the strings. Finally, there are brighter, more animated, rhythmically lively figures (like “sonic cascades,” the composer says), laid over the chant theme. Each of these ideas comes to the fore at different times, but transformed by what has gone before and by its own process of metamorphosis.

Complementing the tightly knit form of the work is the composer’s conception of the voices and orchestra as integrated ensemble. Monk has no interest in the traditional paradigm of vocal melody with instrumental accompaniment. Instead, she observes, “the voices are like instruments, and the instruments are like voices.” She did find inspiration in the playing of the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra musicians, however. At a preliminary reading of the piece, in December, the composer was so taken with the expressiveness of the orchestra’s rendition that she decided to extend certain passages. “I just wanted to hear more of the beautiful sounds they were making,” she explains.

Unusually, Monk considers this music essentially abstract. “I often think of my music in terms of particular images or landscapes,” she observes, “but nothing of the sort came to mind with this piece. The most concrete thoughts I had were of bells, resonance, ringing. But mostly, the piece is about change, energy, and a sense of vastness.”

The composer adds: “This piece is dedicated to Jim Hodges, John Killacky, and the memory of my mother, Audrey Marsh Monk (1911-2009). Special thanks to Allison Sniffin not only for her prodigious skill and hard work but also for her belief in me and this work. Her support was invaluable.”

## ***Night***

Composed in 1996, *Night* is scored for voices and an unusual ensemble of instruments that includes saxophones, synthesizer, bowed psaltery, and several exotic percussion instruments. Much of the work is based on a Hungarian minor scale (Monk deeply admires the music of Béla Bartók), which prompted in the composer’s mind recollections of travels through the former Yugoslavia. That land was then in the midst of a

bloody war, a tragedy that inevitably affected the emotional complexion of the music.

Monk, however, feels that the work speaks to suffering in a broader sense; she notes in particular that of the people of Eastern Europe throughout the 20th century, and the travails of recent victims of natural calamities. “Even though I created *Night* with a particular time and place in mind,” she writes, “I would like to now dedicate this performance to the courage and fortitude of people everywhere who go about their lives in the midst of unspeakable violence and natural disaster.”

## Béla Bartók Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta

**Born:** Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary, March 25, 1881 **Died:** New York City, September 26, 1945 **First performance:** January 21, 1937, in Basel, Switzerland, Paul Sacher conducted the Basel Chamber Orchestra **SLSO premiere:** November 16, 1951, Vladimir Golschmann conducting **Most recent SLSO performance:** October 16, 1983, Leonard Slatkin conducting **Scoring:** Piano, harp, timpani, percussion, xylophone, celesta, and double string orchestra **Performance time:** Approximately 27 minutes



Bartók

**In Context** 1936 *Olympic Games held in Berlin, known as the “Nazi Games”*; *Spain engulfed by civil war*; *Prokofiev’s Peter and the Wolf premieres in Moscow*

Like Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók was one of the great composers of the 20th century. But whereas Stravinsky established his reputation relatively early in his career, his Hungarian counterpart struggled for recognition. By the mid-1930s, Bartók had produced a body of work that should have gained him fame as one of the most important creative musicians of his time. Ironically, he remained little known in his native Hungary, where his works were infrequently performed but regularly attacked for their cosmopolitan modernity. (Surprisingly, Bartók, who often referred to Hungarian folk music in his compositions, was chided in his homeland for failing to produce “nationalist” music.)

Elsewhere in Europe, however, the composer was slowly winning admirers, particularly among other musicians. One of these was Paul Sacher, conductor of the excellent chamber orchestra in Basel, Switzerland. Sacher, was—and remained for many years—a devoted advocate of modern music. He commissioned works from a number of the century’s leading composers. Among them were Stravinsky and Bartók, who wrote his

masterful Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta for the Basel Chamber Orchestra in 1936.

**The Music:** Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta combines the energy and rhythmic drive characteristic of Bartók's early music with a bracing sense of compositional rigor and formal unity. Much of the work springs from a single germinal motif, and thematic cross-references bind together its four movements. In fashioning his composition, Bartók dispensed with the variegated aural colors of the wind instruments in favor of the more homogeneous timbre offered by a double string orchestra; to this he added piano, harp, timpani, xylophone, celesta, and various percussion instruments. From the resulting ensemble he extracted strikingly original aural colors.

The first of the work's four movements opens with a sinuous theme given out by the violas. This subject is taken up by the other strings in turn, each entrance adding a strand to an increasingly dense and intricate web of echoic counterpoint. The music expands to a riveting central climax, whereupon Bartók quite literally reverses course. Inverting the theme—that is, reversing its contours, so that the melodic line falls where it formerly ascended, and vice versa—he leads the music back to its point of origin. Slowly the textures thin out, the dynamic levels fade toward silence, the range of melody and counterpoint constrict at last to a single tone. The movement thus describes a broad formal arc, at once simple and beautiful in shape.

In contrast to the narrow thematic focus and austere contrapuntal discourse of this opening, the second movement presents an extraordinarily energetic and varied surface. Bartók seemingly calls forth all the instrumental colors and textures at his disposal and enlivens the proceedings with antiphonal statements and answers between the orchestra's two string choirs.

The third movement provides an example of the atmospheric "night music" that Bartók occasionally composed. Here the nocturnal air seems mysterious, even eerie. And amid its clicks, rustling, and other unusual sonorities, we hear recollections of the writhing theme that opened the work.

The finale begins as a lively and rhythmically complex peasant dance and climaxes with a reappearance of the theme from the first movement, which Bartók proceeds to clothe in rich chorale harmonies. Apart from this, the composer presents a generous succession of melodic ideas, most of them evoking the sound of the Hungarian folk dances he knew and loved so well.

The House Foundation for the Arts, Inc.  
260 West Broadway, Suite 2, New York, NY 10013  
Tel: 212.904.1330 Fax: 212.904.1305  
Email: [monk@meredithmonk.org](mailto:monk@meredithmonk.org) Web: [www.meredithmonk.org](http://www.meredithmonk.org)

Incorporated in 1971, The House Foundation for the Arts provides production and management services for Meredith Monk, Meredith Monk & Vocal Ensemble, and The House Company.

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