

MEREDITH MONK

REALMS

PHAEDRA ENSEMBLE



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Stringsongs (2004)

- 1 Cliff Light 6:17
- 2 Tendrils 8:00
- 3 Obsidian Chorale 1:55
- 4 Phantom Strings 3:37

Backlight (1999/2015)

- 5 Movement I 6:58
- 6 Movement II 5:52
- 7 Movement III 4:02

- 8 Realm Variations (2012) 19:43

Music by **Meredith Monk**

Performed by **Phaedra Ensemble**

Artistic Director: **Phillip Granell**

Album Producer: **Jamie Hamilton**

Mix Engineer: **Alex Bonney**

Mastering Engineer: **David Rowell**

Orchestration: **Meredith Monk and Allison Sniffin**

Score Preparation: **Allison Sniffin**



Stringsongs (2004)

Phillip Granell: Violin I
Chihiro Ono: Violin II
Richard Jones: Viola
Sergio Serra: Cello

"Tendrils" recorded by Chris Parker and
Marc McCouig at Alice's Loft, London,
England, June 2018

Produced by Fred Thomas

"Cliff Light", "Obsidian Chorale" and
"Phantom Strings"
recorded by Aaron Holloway-Nahum
at Unwound Studios, London, England,
November 2021

Produced by Aaron Holloway-Nahum
Additional assistance by Jamie Hamilton

Stringsongs commissioned by
the Kronos Quartet

Backlight (1999/2015)

Joidy Blanco: Flute
Russell Coates: Oboe
Heather Roche: Clarinet
Anthony Friend: Clarinet (Movement III)
Rebecca Allen: Bassoon
Katherine Tinker: Piano
Phillip Granell: Viola
Alice Purton: Cello
Lucy Goddard: Conductor

Recorded by Ronan Phelan at Masterchord
Studio, London, England, February 2025

Produced by Jamie Hamilton with
Colin Alexander

Production support by Phillip Granell

Backlight commissioned by
Carnegie Hall for Ensemble ACJW

Realm Variations (2012)

Dan Shao: Piccolo
Heather Roche: Clarinet
Kate Hainsworth: Horn
Rebecca Allen: Bassoon
Jean Kelly: Harp
Zahra Benyounes: Violin
Phillip Granell: Viola
Sarah Dacey: Soprano I
Heloise Werner: Soprano II
Rosie Middleton: Alto I
Donna Lennard: Alto II
Kerry Andrew: Alto II
Oskar McCarthy: Baritone
Ed Randell: Bass
Lucy Goddard: Conductor

Recorded by Ronan Phelan at Masterchord
Studio, London, England, February 2025

Produced by Jamie Hamilton with
Colin Alexander

Production support by Phillip Granell

Realm Variations commissioned by
the San Francisco Symphony



The first time I met Meredith Monk in person was in the spring of 2025. I knew she would be performing in Europe, so I travelled to Budapest to see her perform alongside percussionist John Hollenbeck. I remember watching her walk slowly onto the stage, a slight figure, and then this extraordinary, pure sound emerging: a voice of remarkable clarity and power.

When I went backstage to meet her, she turned and greeted me with great warmth and a “Oh hi, sweetie!”, as though I were someone she had known for years. This was my first live experience of Meredith.

However, we had already been working together — sometimes quite intensely — over Zoom and email for some years before that, while recording and producing *String-songs*. Meeting Meredith, even on Zoom for the first time, was something of a revelation. I remember being struck immediately by the humour in her eyes, the sincerity in her voice, and how quickly a sense of connection emerged, even across that distance.

This set the tone for our interactions, which have continued in much the same spirit ever since. It seemed fitting that the notes for this album are presented as a conversation, allowing Meredith's voice to come through clearly. The conversation took place over Zoom in January 2026 during the final stages of making *Realms*.

Phillip Granell, 2026

Phil: I was curious — have you started to think about these three pieces, *Stringsongs*, *Backlight* and *Realm Variations*, not just as separate works, but as a body of work? Has that begun to happen, or do they still feel like three distinct pieces?

Meredith: I think of it as an overall concept. There are two aspects. One is that this recording is an introduction to my instrumental writing. The vocal writing is not in the foreground. I've never done an album like this that's almost completely instrumental, except for *Piano Songs*, but that was just for one instrument. In *Realm Variations*, while there are voices, I think of them as instruments and the instruments as voices. So that's a concept that goes through the whole album.

And then there's a principle in the Tibetan Buddhism tradition that I've been working with for a long time, joining heaven and earth through the human realm or more succinctly, the principle of Heaven, Earth, Human. I would say the three pieces together deal in some way with that idea. Each one centres in a particular realm, but it's not black and white. *Backlight* conjures the human realm; *Stringsongs* dwells in the earth realm, but it includes some sky elements; and *Realm Variations* inhabits sky and earth, as well as under the ground, since it mostly deals with the two ends of the sonic range.

Also, all the pieces are sonic landscapes, each a different one. Each piece explores new colours and textures.

Phil: Just to clarify, in terms of the order they were written, was it *Stringsongs*, then *Backlight*, then *Realm Variations*?

Meredith: No, it was *Stringsongs*, *Realm Variations*, and then *Backlight*. I was working on *Realm Variations* at the same time as *On Behalf of Nature*, which ended up being a larger interdisciplinary piece. There are one or two pieces of material that ended up in both *On Behalf of Nature* and *Realm Variations*, as I was starting to play with some of the material around the same time.

Phil: In terms of writing technique, did you feel there was a progression? In how you approach the instruments and the orchestration? I remember you saying that with *Stringsongs*, you recorded your voice for “Phantom Strings”.

Meredith: I actually wrote it by laying tracks with my voice. I even sang the cello part! The progression has been that I’m much more comfortable with composing for instruments now, and I love the process of orchestration more and more as I go along.

In earlier works, the balance between voices and instruments was more in favour of the voice. I always kept the instrumental writing purposely simple and spacious so that the voice had room to fly. Then little by little, I included more instruments and began working with wonderful players. By the time I wrote *On Behalf of Nature*, for example, the voices and instruments carried equal weight. After that, I went back to primarily working with voices in *Cellular Songs*. I always have to touch base with my vocal instrument and my vocal imagination. I need to reconnect

with the voice — that’s my foundation. From there, I can return to composing for instruments.

When I began *Stringsongs*, I had just finished *Possible Sky*, my first piece for full orchestra. I was already interested in combining voices and instruments to create a third colour. Working with Kronos Quartet was especially important — a very detailed exploration of string techniques and colour. It was very much like making *Songs from the Hill* and also *Our Lady of Late* years ago. With both of those pieces, my idea was that each section explored a particular aspect of the voice. So I was embodying a different quality of the voice in each section, with contrasting techniques and ways of producing vocal sound. That’s what I tried to do with *Stringsongs*. It was exciting for me to realise that strings are so vocal.

The breath of the arm, the movement of the arm, is very much like the breath of the voice. And yet there are things that strings can do that we can’t do as singers, like holding a note indefinitely. We are limited by our breath lengths.

Phil: Finally, thinking about all three pieces — since they were commissioned, do you ever feel the urge to write for a specific ensemble? Or does the material come first?

Meredith: Usually, I work on the material first. So it comes from the inside out. If I have material that comes up, and I think it would be beautiful for a string quartet, then that’s what I would create. It’s not, “Now I’m going to write a string quartet.” The music comes first and then I figure out what would be the voicing or sound world that would fulfill it.

I don't really love commissions, because I'm continuously working on creating new material. I don't need somebody to tell me that I need to do something at a certain time. My process includes some internal pressure, having the patience to just listen for what a piece wants and act as a conduit for what's coming through. But I've been grateful, too, for these commissions because they have been a way to stretch my vocabulary.

With *Stringsongs*, of course, it was going to be a string quartet. But I remember saying to David Harrington, "Could I have a vocal component in it?" And he said, "Let's just do a string quartet." And I thought, okay, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to try something new.

I love to explore and discover things. During my whole life, joy has come from these moments of discovery. If I can stretch myself and learn something in each piece, then it's very exciting for me.

Phil: Moving on to *Backlight*. We talked about it inhabiting an urban space. I ended up associating it with New York, and when you mentioned film noir, that brought the piece into focus. For me, there's also your humour in this piece — Does this resonate with you?

Meredith: That's interesting because I would never think that about *Backlight*, but of course, humour has always been very important to me. I was trying for a mysterious, haunting quality. New York at night can have that feel. And yes, it also brings up film noir, that shadowy, dreamlike atmosphere. *Backlight* is a technique in film noir that uses silhouettes and shadows, often lighting the subject

from behind. To me, the piece has a very urban, nocturnal feel, until the third movement when a faster tempo and a texture that gradually builds in complexity shifts as if the energy of day returns. Musically, I was exploring bitonality and dissonance.

What is interesting is that I actually started working on that material in the late 1990s. I've always had music notebooks, almost like a music diary, where I notate musical phrases and sketches that I am working on. I was going through a notebook from that period when I realised that I now knew what to do with the material, particularly the first and second movements. It was nice to go back to that.

Phil: So, *Backlight* feels set in some urban space, then *Stringsongs* for me is about New Mexico. I remember how much you talked to us about that place and your time there when we were working on the string quartet. Both pieces feel strongly anchored to places, even if imagined.

Meredith: It's a funny thing. I wrote a lot of it there, but I didn't realise how connected it was to that landscape until afterwards, when I was in California working with Kronos. It wasn't something I set out to do.

"Cliff Light" is jagged, asymmetrical, angular, rough and edgy, because the light shifts. If you watch those cliffs during the day, the sun reveals tiny parts at different times. So it's about shifting light and texture.

There's contrast — weight and lightness, sharp attack versus sustain — but also it's one texture, everything bleeding together.

And then “Tendrils” has more of a plant-like, organic, interdependent feeling. The textures are very subtle. It’s like something growing. It reminds me of Georgia O’Keeffe. She used to say, “Just look.” You can look very closely at something for a long time and see everything in it.

Phil: I think that’s one of the strengths of the piece — how visually charged it feels, without being literal.

Meredith: I would never want it to be illustrative. When I’m working, I’m just working on the music. I’m not thinking programmatically. The imagery comes afterwards.

What I love about music is that it gives the listener freedom. They can have any image or association that comes up in their mind. Their imagination is free.

Phil: That’s interesting, because with *Realm Variations* also, it’s not programmatic about Buddhism, but it still feels like it holds those ideas. There’s an emotional language that carries across all the pieces without ever being too literal.

Meredith: Exactly. I hope the titles aren’t too illustrative. The idea of *Stringsongs* was that each movement explores a particular way of working with strings.

In “Obsidian Chorale”, it’s long, breathing lines, like one big instrument — almost like a giant accordion or harmonium. And “Phantom Strings” is lighter, more thread-like, more delicate.

Phil: Yes, that sense of breath through the arm — that really comes across.

Meredith: That’s such a beautiful idea, that something we associate with breath can exist in the arm. It becomes a different kind of motion. Motion is a big inspiration for me — I’m very body-oriented, because of my background in Dalcroze Eurhythmics and dance.

Phil: And “Phantom Strings” — there’s a groove to it, a kind of playfulness.

Meredith: Yes, it’s very rhythmic. I thought of it as lilting, dancing, delicate — strings as threads. There’s a slow arc, but within it a complex rhythmic structure. Many things happening at once.

Phil: On *Realm Variations* — we’ve touched on Buddhism, but also the idea of sonic range.

Meredith: Yes. In the Buddhist tradition, there are these realms, but I was also thinking musically — high and low. The piece was commissioned for the great piccolo player Catherine Payne. When I heard a recording of her playing, I realised that she played with the lyricism of a singer, so I treated the instrument that way.

The opening is like an overture — opening the space. And then the piece moves from very distinct sonic registers into something more blended. I doubled instruments with voices to create a third sound.

Phil: More broadly, has your Buddhist practice shaped how you make work?

Meredith: When I first started meditation, it aligned with a lot of my aesthetic principles. But now it's more about commitment — trying to make something of benefit. Not escapism — not pretending everything is fine — but something with strength as well as spaciousness, something that helps or inspires people to slow down and be in the moment. Because Buddhism is sharp. Your mind has to be sharp. There's that metaphor by the brilliant teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche— "licking honey off the edge of a very sharp knife." It's not "everything's going to be wonderful." Buddhism is looking at the darkest, most painful as well as the most beautiful things and everything in between. It's not just sitting there — it's study and meditation. It's rigorous. And that's what I've always wanted to do in my music. In the last thirty years or so, I've been even more conscious of and committed to wanting to make something that is life-affirming, that might inspire people to want to go on — something that has magic in it, that allows you to hear and see things in a fresh way, wake up to the moment and the miracle of being alive.





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