

Sample Essay for Chapter 13

Name two “experimental” works from the assigned listening in Chapter 13, and describe in which ways the works break new compositional ground.

**STOP** and write your essay before scrolling down.

Name **two “experimental” works** from the assigned listening in Chapter 13, and **describe** in which ways the works **break new compositional ground**.

There are several experimental works described in Chapter 13, but in this essay I will focus on Meredith **Monk’s *Atlas***, and Ruth Crawford **Seeger’s “Rat Riddles.”** Monk’s *Atlas* is perhaps most overtly **experimental in that** it is an opera that is largely wordless, except for a few utterances of the main character. In taking a genre that normally tells a story with text, Monk manages to depict her narrative in a wordless manner that still addresses the heart of her story, a spiritual allegory. Like many experimental composers, Monk takes advantage of **more than one unique technique**. For example, she uses cleverly uses musical ostinati, or repeated patterns, that provide a backdrop to the lead character’s agonizing wails as she travels on a spiritual quest. On that static background, she uses vocal ululation, a high-pitched vocal sound used to express emotion in many global cultures. In addition, Monk uses

growling sounds and excessive vocal ranges to depict the full emotional range of her character. **In all, much of Monk's experimentation is with vocal timbre.**

Seeger's "**Rat Riddles**" is another experimental work that uniquely combines voice and instruments, but **we can go beyond timbre** here to focus on the **experimental nature of her structure, or form.**

Importantly, this work is created using serial technique, in which the composer creates her work by laying out notes and rhythms according to a complex, mathematical matrix. On top of this, Seeger uses dissonant counterpoint, where two or more melodic lines are simultaneously combined, to project "stabs" of dissonant harmony that help express the text.

Both of these composers stand as important experimental composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Monk continues using her experimental voice today.