

Guitar Hero Goes to the Opera

How the video game's godfather plans to democratize one of the oldest musical art forms

By [Ada Brunstein](#)

IMAGE CREDIT: JILL STEINBERG

THE STORY IS as old as humanity itself. A man—in this case a successful businessman—grapples with his own mortality and wants desperately to leave a legacy after he dies. But this story has never been told as composer Tod Machover tells it.

In this operatic version, *Death and the Powers*, the businessman, Simon Powers, disappears after the second scene, leaving behind his invention, the “System,” into which he has uploaded his personality, memories, and feelings. “The matter is mortal, the System lives on,” he chants.

For the rest of the story, Simon is a disembodied presence, and his wife, his daughter, and his protégé commune with him through objects that come alive with spectacular lights, movements, and sounds. In this opera, flesh-and-blood singers share the stage with robotic dancers, emoting walls, and a “Musical Chandelier” that is part sculpture, part character, part oversize harp, mostly controlled by some spectral presence offstage. It’s a collaboration between Machover, the creator of the technology behind Guitar Hero and the head of the Hyperinstruments/Opera of the Future Group at MIT; former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, who wrote the libretto; director Diane Paulus; and the Hollywood production designer Alex McDowell, who designed the OperaBots and helped turn a static set into an undulating one. Funded by the Futurum Association, the opera premiered in Monaco six months before its U.S. debut in Boston this March.

The Musical Chandelier



Jill Steinberg

The Musical Chandelier engages in a sensuous duet with Simon Powers' wife, Evvy (mezzo-soprano Patricia Risley) in the "Touch Me" scene.

SLIDESHOW: Scenes from the techno opera theater

The trick for Machover was to connect the performer, who is out of sight for most of the show, to Simon's technologically mediated presence onstage. To achieve this, Machover and two MIT students, Peter Torpey and Elly Jessop, developed the "Disembodied Performance" system, which uses sensors on the chest, arms, and hands of the singer James Maddalena to measure his breathing, gestures, and voice pitch and volume, and turn them into a visual and audio display. Simon's house becomes a kaleidoscopic, pulsating, shape-shifting space that conveys his presence. OperaBots, somehow endearing with their triangular heads atop scrawny plastic tubes, accompany the performers onstage and are choreographed in real time by "puppeteers" with Xbox controls. And iPads and 43 assorted computers allow the staff to make adjustments throughout the show to the sound coming out of 143 speakers.

One of the more remarkable displays is the Chandelier, a harp-like instrument that gracefully changes shape. Through most of the performance, the Chandelier hangs overhead. But in a moving and weirdly erotic scene, it descends and envelops Simon's wife, the scantily clad Evvy, who misses him and longs to communicate. "Touch me," she sings, as she plucks the Chandelier's Teflon strings. With this gesture (and slick software), she controls the timbre of the Chandelier's sound as well as the pitch and volume of Maddalena's baritone notes, as he responds to her touch with a long, deep "More." I don't think a string has ever been so salaciously plucked. Even watching it on video, I could almost feel the reverberations.

Still, Machover didn't want the hardware to upstage the performers. What "technology tends to do in live performance these days," he told me, "is shrink people. I wanted to see how can we use technology to really enhance the presence of human beings."

This sensibility guides Machover's vision of music's future. He wants to develop, he said, a "new form of Personal Opera, so that anyone can combine sounds, images, and stories to make musical narratives about themselves or about their loved ones." Machover's video-game technology (which also led to Rock Band) put rock-star power in the hands of anyone with a PlayStation and a dream. Are we ready for a future of head-banging baritones?

The magazine *Opera* praised the production, declaring "what a good opera composer Machover is, bringing the 'traditional', necessary skills to a far from traditional work." For all the technobling, ultimately it's the relationships, the loss, the longing to connect that give his opera its emotional weight. Following the characters' struggle to understand the boundaries between spirit, body, and technology, I couldn't help but wonder how these themes play out in my own life, where the technology is simpler, but serves a strikingly similar purpose. I upload myself onto Facebook multiple times a day. Anyone visiting my page will have a clear sense of my presence. And by the look of things, it'll be around a lot longer than I will.

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