

## ‘Robots Opera’ brought to life through lights, sound

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BOSTON –Tod Machover and a crew of collaborators have taken one of the most ancient subjects out there – death, and the idea of trying to cheat it – and created an eye-poppingly futuristic philosophical exploration in “Death and the Powers: The Robots’ Opera.” And you can only sit back in wonder at the imagination and inventiveness that allows robots to dance, chandeliers to sing and walls of light to breathe.

The story by U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky and Randy Weiner centers on dying billionaire inventor Simon Powers (baritone James Maddalena), who manages to download himself into his surroundings through “The System.” (“The matter is mortal, The System lives on.”) Simon then communicates with his family, with help from son/assistant Nicholas (tenor Hal Cazalet), through sound, voice and giant lighted bookshelves that can change color, project images and convey thoughts.

The visuals and sound to make the set a real character are accomplished by a host of designers, especially production designer Alex McDowell, who created the walls and “operabots.” While offstage for most scenes, Maddalena performs through an MIT-designed “Disembodied Performance” technique that uses sensors and computers to translate his voice and movements into what the set does.

Machover – director of the Opera of the Future group at the MIT Media Lab and creator of groundbreaking music-performance technologies, including the Hyperinstruments idea that led to video games “Guitar Hero” and “Rock Band” – also can make changes to onstage sound and technology through an iPad as the show progresses.

It’s a big risk when relying on cutting-edge computerization to help tell a story – not only for potential glitches, but for the emotional value. “Death and the Powers” teeters on that fine line of having effects overwhelm the live performers.

That it doesn’t – quite – is thanks to Diane Paulus’ tender and graceful direction (of both humans and robots), and the poignant performances of Maddalena; soprano Emily Albrink as wife Evvy, who longs to be with him again; and particularly soprano Sara Heaton as questioning daughter Miranda. All give powerful performances that enhance Machover’s acoustic/ electronic, often sharp-edged and dissonant score as well as the poetry of Pinsky’s libretto that can be illuminating and rich.

Both Evvy and Miranda are desolate at the loss of Simon’s touch, and Albrink plays an entire near-erotic scene with a waving, winged chandelier made of Teflon strings that she sometimes plucks like a harp. (It was difficult Friday night, however, to distinguish that chandelier’s sound from the rest of the orchestra.) Miranda is anguished at the loss of Simon’s body, but also his humanity as the world outside falls into crisis and Simon, focused on his interior world, refuses to help. She accuses him of being selfish, but his response is indicative of the philosophical issues explored here: “How can I be selfish if I’m not even a self?” Also memorable are the “operabots,” who are simply lighted triangular heads on clear posts. But the way backstage joysticks can make them glide across the stage and vocalize their confusion at these curious issues is almost endearing.

That Machover, Paulus and company can project human characteristics and emotions so clearly through lights and machines alongside performers is certainly a reimagining of what most people consider opera. That the story also explores the topical issue of human interaction with technology alongside the question of legacy makes "Death and the Powers" even more intriguing.