



Death and the Powers: the Robots' Opera

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Review by Mary Holbrow

As Tod Machover's new opera *Death and the Powers* opens, we meet a team of robots who are puzzled by the way humans talk about death. The robots are getting ready to enact a ritual drama involving four humans from long ago, back in the Organic Age—humans who were absorbed for all eternity into the vast information System of which the bot team is a part. *Photo by Paula Aguilera: Robots conferring with Miranda (soprano Sara Heaton) and Nicholas (tenor Hal Cazalet).*

The robots hum and flash and weave, nodding their winsome triangular faces as they speculate about what “death” might have meant back in that era. The term doesn't correspond to anything in their files.

Is it a form of waste? Is it an excessive cost? A form of entropy? Or is it merely data rearranged?

The robots hand over the job of interpreting the idea to the four humans they represent—Simon Powers, a legendary entrepreneur (played by James Maddalena, baritone); his daughter Miranda (soprano Sara Heaton); his “third and final wife” Evvy (soprano Emily Albrink); and his protégé Nicholas (tenor Hal Cazalet). The four are reembodyed by the System, a set of gigantic moving cabinets that reconfigure themselves and scintillate and vibrate according to the programming that forms the permanent record of this small human family. The living bodies, long since disappeared, are now reconstituted by the System; they take on their earthly forms and share the story of how they transcended the human condition.

Death and the Powers: the Robots' Opera had its U.S. premiere on Friday, March 18 at the Cutler Majestic Theatre on Tremont Street in Boston. The production draws on an international array of cultural resources and institutions, but it is a local product in many ways. Composer Tod Machover is Professor of Music and Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Director of the Opera of the Future Group at the MIT Media Lab. The opera's director is Diane Paulus, Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) of Cambridge. The libretto is by Robert Pinsky, a Boston University faculty member and three-term U. S. Poet Laureate; he collaborated on the story with playwright Randy Weiner, also associated with A.R.T. The conductor is Gil Rose of Opera Boston. For more information see <http://operaofthefuture.wordpress.com/2011/03/12/death-and-the-powers-pr...>

The performance was greeted warmly by the audience at the sold-out event. Set in eight scenes plus prologue and epilogue, the work combines electronic music with live sound from the orchestra pit. It runs about an hour and a half with no intermission.

The music is exciting to hear for the first time and promises further rewards on deeper acquaintance. Lovers of traditional opera will appreciate lyrical passages such as Miranda's meditation on her feelings about her father, or the splendid trio by aid-seeking representatives of The United Way (counter-tenor Douglas Dodson), The United Nations (baritone David Kravitz), and The Administration (Tom McNichols, bass). Themes and motifs are laid out and reprised in ways immediately recognizable to people whose musical education started with Bach or Mozart.

Devotees of the modern and post-modern will enjoy the futuristic aspects. The bionic Nicholas explains—in part through dance—how to get along without a body. Evvy sings a passionate love duet with a magical chandelier, whose form Simon has taken on in the System.

There are pop and everyday elements, too. Simon and Evvy recall a long-ago dance date in detail, right down to the tune the orchestra was playing (“Begin the Beguine”) and the kind of hedge (pittosporum) that they sat behind. There's a political side, with Miranda begging Simon to succor the poor and miserable, who ultimately almost engulf her. There are even jokes, as when Simon makes a flippant pun on a poem by William Butler Yeats, or when he brings the conversation down to earth with reminders of how rich and powerful he was in life and is determined to

remain as part of the System:

“And by the way,

I have billions of bucks,

And I can still sign checks. That’s what!”

After the curtain fell the robot team trundled onstage along with soloists, local crowd scene extras, conductor, composer, and technicians; all shared in the extended applause. Following performances here on Tuesday, March 22 and Friday, March 25, the show heads west for the 2011 Spring Festival of the Chicago Opera Theater.

The original stimulus for the innovative work came from the Association Futurum of Monaco, according to a program note by Machover. The world premiere took place in Monte Carlo in September 2010 under the patronage of H.S.H. Prince Albert II. Here in Cambridge the event is part of FAST150, a three-month Festival of Art, Science and Technology honoring MIT’s 150th anniversary. See <http://arts.mit.edu/fast/pressinfo/>