

Death and the Powers, Cutler Majestic Theatre, Boston

By George Loomis

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Technological wonders go only so far towards achieving results in the opera house. Tod Machover's *Death and the Powers: the Robots' Opera*, the latest work by a mainstay of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, has a dramatis personae that includes 12 functioning robots. Yet the quality of Machover's music, steeped in the language of Elliott Carter and Pierre Boulez, wedded to an imaginative libretto by Robert Pinsky, is what makes the opera worth seeing.

Machover, who has invented electronic instruments and developed the technology behind the *Guitar Hero* video game series, was a natural for a commission from Kawther Al-Abood's Futurum Association, based in Monaco, where *Death and the Powers* premiered last September.

"Powers" is the last name of the protagonist, a billionaire businessman and inventor who uploads himself into "The System" in the hope of transcending his failing body. Commandingly played by James Maddalena with the assurance he recently brought to the title role in the Metropolitan Opera's *Nixon in China*, he is initially delighted with the arrangement – "I can still sign checks!" – and urges his third wife Evvy (Emily Albrink, an able soprano), his student Nicholas (the clear-voiced tenor Hal Cazalet) and daughter Miranda (the soprano Sara Heaton in lovely voice) to join him.

Miranda resists. In the opera's most lyrically affecting music she stakes her lot with humanity, warts and all, and emerges as the story's most sympathetic character. Her duet with her often amusingly self-confident father is the high point.

Machover's skilful vocal writing makes possible some other choice ensembles, and he builds tension arrestingly by insistently repeating phrases. More broadly, he deftly mixes electronic sounds with his orchestra's 13 traditional instruments; interludes often have an eerie futuristic quality that contrasts with the lively rhythms of the singers' scenes.

The robots, like live animals on stage, are endearing but essentially superfluous. And the production, efficiently directed by Diane Paulus as part of MIT's Fast festival, involves another technological dimension. Sensors measuring Maddalena's physical reactions supply data that help determine the look of Alex McDowell's decor. The fine conducting by Gil Rose, fresh from Opera Boston's triumph with Hindemith's *Cardillac*, underscores that it is the human dimension that really counts.

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