

Tod Machover's *Death and the Powers*, plus Norrington's C.P.E. Bach and the Cantata Singers' B-minor Mass

Robotics

By LLOYD SCHWARTZ | March 25, 2011



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ROBOT LOVE Emotionally complex and intellectually ambitious, *Death and the Powers* is hobbled by theatrical and musical missteps.

In her director's note for the American premiere of *Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera*, which was composed by Tod Machover, with a libretto by poet Robert Pinsky, Diane Paulus, artistic director of the American Repertory Theater, wrote that this "work of music-theater . . . has brought together artists from the widest range of disciplines — from theater and film to modern dance and the cutting-edge technology of the MIT Media Lab." Paulus's failure to mention the two most essential figures in the creation of an opera — the composer and the librettist — manifested itself in her production, in which the cute robots got more applause than the outstanding human performers. Even the gauche new subtitle, "The Robots' Opera," feeds into the pre-performance publicity focused almost exclusively on the electronics. What kind of "music-theater" is Paulus selling? The opera is emotionally complex and intellectually ambitious, though at the Cutler Majestic on opening night (the final performance is this Friday, March 25), it was less satisfying than what I saw on the video of the world premiere in Monaco last fall.

Pinsky's moving and verbally playful libretto tells the story of a beyond-wealthy but dying entrepreneur named Simon Powers. (Even the title of the opera is a pun.) Refusing to accept his death, he allows himself to become absorbed in an electronic "System" in which he can "live" — bodiless — forever. His young assistant, Nicholas (the refined and athletic tenor Hal Cazalet), almost an adopted son, whom he'd rescued from a ward for severely disabled children, is ready to join him, and his third "and best" wife tunes into his new incarnation on headphones. Only his daughter, Miranda (shades of *The Tempest*), is not sure she wants to give up her body and all its limitations in order to join him in immortality. This is all bracketed by a prologue and epilogue in which the robots of the future ritually act out their pre-history, though they no longer understand even the concept of Death. Powerful stuff.



Machover's music, which combines a live orchestra (the splendid Boston Modern Orchestra Project, conducted by Gil Rose) and "live" electronic manipulation by a team from Machover's Media Lab, is also powerful — maybe too powerful. Pinsky's text has a poet's mercurial wit and constantly shifting tone. Powers (the phenomenal baritone James Maddalena — *Nixon in China's* original Nixon) sings Yeats's lines in "Sailing to Byzantium"

about becoming an immortal golden bird, then a moment later flips Yeats the bird. But Machover's score is less flexible from moment to moment. The tone doesn't change on a dime. Several times, the music actually emphasizes the wrong word. (When Powers disappears into the System, for example, the real question is "Are you *there*?" not "Are *you* there?")

The music for the robots that begins the opera sounds like a horror-film soundtrack, and the robots declaim their lines like pompous doomsday-movie narrators. Their voices are amplified, which heightens the disembodied, mechanical quality. But then, *everyone's* voice is amplified — and disembodied. This emphasizes the idea that everything that follows is the "robots' opera." And since the singers have not been directed to display convincing human interaction, there's a huge cost to this distancing of the audience from the human drama. The amplified singing steamrollers the listeners, and aiming glaring lights into the theater (where haven't we seen this before?) just continues the assault.

Not that there isn't musical variety from scene to scene, from sequences of vigorous rhythmic assertiveness to passages of hypnotic lyricism (as when Powers's wife — soprano Emily Albrink — enters humming). Powers's entrance into the System — almost the inverse of the "death" of HAL the computer in Kubrick's *2001* — is unforgettable. Even stronger, both musically and dramatically, is the gripping final confrontation between Powers (Maddalena back in his real body after a long stretch of off-stage singing) and Miranda (soprano Sara Heaton), which ends with piercing irresolution when she thinks she prefers death to leaving her body behind.

The weakest section is the long satirical sequence in which gray-suited representatives of the United Nations (baritone David Kravitz), the United Way (countertenor Douglas Dodson), and the Administration (bass Tom McNichols) demand an interview with Powers. (They don't know he's died.) A major musical miscalculation is Machover's new setting of "Urlicht" ("primal light"), the German poem about humanity's pain and great need that Mahler set so sublimely in his *Resurrection* Symphony; he still has no competition. Weaker still, though not musically, is the embarrassing scene in which Paulus has the "World's Miseries" come clawing (silently) across the stage like the chorus of *Les Miz*.

Celebrated British production designer Alex McDowell (*Minority Report*, *Fight Club*) has created a sleekly striking set that includes a voluptuous chandelier (a kind of electronic Venus flytrap) and three rotating walls with changing lights (Donald Holder, lighting designer) that look like bookshelves and which the nimble Cazalet can climb. (I got a little tired of it well before the opera ended.) Choreographer Karole Armitage, once one of Merce Cunningham's most characterful dancers, created some amusing dances for both humans and robots. And the extended technical team (far too many to list) is surely phenomenal.

Some of *Death and the Powers* is truly stirring. But many of its 90 intermissionless minutes dragged, and I left the theater less exhilarated than slightly dispirited. The opera might be tighter — and more immediate — by minimizing, or even cutting, the prologue and epilogue with the robots, and by drastically abbreviating the UN and World Miseries stuff. And I wish most of the singing weren't amplified, or at least were more evenly amplified. Maybe the Majestic just needs a better sound system.



C.P.E. LOVE Sir Roger Norrington conducted the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in a program devoted to J.S. Bach's second son.

The Boston Early Music Festival offered us a rare opportunity to hear an entire program of music by Bach's second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel (a/k/a C.P.E.) Bach, who makes a fascinating bridge between his father and the classicism of Haydn and Mozart. Sir Roger Norrington brought the magnificent strings of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and strong soloists in two concertos: Steven Devine, harpsichord, and Richard Lester, cello. The slow movements of these concertos were glorious, as inventive as C.P.E.'s other movements but with a greater sense of direction, more inspired musical lines, and a profound inwardness. The four symphonies on either side of these concertos varied in interest, despite C.P.E.'s startling twists of tone (even within a single movement), and serious, sometimes bizarre playfulness. Too much of this music runs on its odd samplings of stock phrases. One movement reminded me of Mozart's satirical *A Musical Joke*, except that Mozart's jokes were better, and he knew he was joking. Still, a refreshing change from programming as usual.

In his program note to Papa Bach's B-minor Mass, which interrupted the Cantata Singers' season devoted to composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (himself a notable Bach conductor), music director David Hoose wrote of Bach's "meeting of naked emotion and limitless skill." There was certainly naked emotion in this performance. The monumental opening Kyrie eleison started coolly but gradually built to an overwhelming intensity, and just before intermission, the breathlessness of the "Cum Sancto Spiritu" captured Bach's outburst of jubilation. It was mostly the other fast sections that worked best, though most moving was the final "Dona nobis pacem," which began in hushed awe and grew larger, more confident, and more steadily — limitlessly — expansive.

But much of what came between these great moments seemed a little square and solemn. The outstanding soloists (sopranos Lynn Torgove and Karol Ryczek, alto Janna Baty, tenor Frank Kelley, baritone Dana Whiteside, bass Mark Andrew Cleveland) included some of Boston's most expressive singers. But even they seemed to be singing as if they were in church, not as if the words had immediate personal resonance. The usually excellent chorus sounded a little fuzzy, with less than the crispest diction. For me, the real heroes were the obbligato players: Danielle Maddon (violin), Jacqueline DeVoe (flute), Peggy Pearson (oboe and oboe d'amore), and Neil Deland (horn). They accompanied the arias and duets with more naked emotion than I heard in the singing.