

Death and the Powers *By Andrew Porter*

(c) Published: October 1, 2010

Tod Machover, born in 1953, ‘learnt opera from the inside’ as Toscanini did, playing cello in the pit—Toscanini in Parma and then La Scala, Machover at the Canadian Opera. His composition teachers included Dallapiccola, Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter. In 1978 he joined IRCAM,



where his first opera, *Valis*, after the novel by Philip K. Dick, had its premiere in 1987. Operas with sci-fi plots—by Glass, Bussotti, Anthony Davis, even Tippett—were prominent in the ’80s.

Overcoming prejudices—against the genre, and against operas in which electronic technology is used not just for special effects (as in Musgrave’s *Voice of Ariadne*, Birtwistle’s *Mask of Orpheus*)—and knowing from other works that Machover is a remarkable composer, I got round to *Valis* at last, in 1989, after it had been revised and recorded. And heard what I called ‘one of the brightest and most intelligent of new American operas ... no monotony or meagreness of sound ... well-shaped, carefully paced acts ... variety of texture, tone, intensity’.

Death and the Powers, 23 years after *Valis*, is even better. It was given four performances, in the course of three days, in the admirable 1879 Salle Garnier at Monte-Carlo (big enough to have

held the famous French Rings under Gunsbourg yet intimately communicative). It goes to Boston in March, Chicago in April. The libretto is by Robert Pinsky, who has been America's poet laureate. Simon Powers (baritone), a rich, powerful tycoon and inventor nearing the end of his days, defeats death by shedding his mortal attributes and transferring his personality and character into 'the system'. During the course of the opera—seven scenes, some 90 minutes without interval—his third wife Evvy (mezzo) and his assistant Nicholas (tenor) follow him there. His daughter Miranda (soprano) hesitates, and in a radiant finale—high Bs shining steadily above a sequence of troubled, troubling chords—is reluctant to abandon the world of suffering humanity. The opera is enacted in some distant future as a 'ritual' by robots—which have the ability, fortunately, to present themselves as living, vivid personalities. After a brief prologue they do so. The drama done, in an epilogue they resume robot form, asking puzzled questions: 'What is Death? ... Why choose to suffer—whatever that means?' Excellent questions, the Robot Leader says, and awards Human Rights Credits to the enactors.

Questions asked in *Anna Karenina* by Levin—'Why do I live?', 'How ought I to live?'—underlie Machover's dramatic works. Tolstoy scorned the operas made from his novels, with much romance and little questioning. In some operatic versions of *Anna Karenina* Levin is simply omitted (though not in those contemplated, never composed, by Janáček and Britten). Alfano's *Risurrezione*, an opera not without merit, is essentially *The Prince and the Pauper*, with a soprano role that Eugenia Burzio, Giuseppina Cobelli, and Mary Garden embraced; also Magda Olivero, who declared that not even Callas at her greatest could produce the shivers that Cobelli's *Katasha* sent down her spine. Machover's *Resurrection* (Houston, 1999), a more 'serious' opera, was compromised (if memory serves; though memory holds mainly young Joyce DiDonato's wonderful outpouring of unforced, beautiful tone as *Katasha*) by the endeavour to reach and stir a 'conventional' opera audience. And we were stirred.

There's no Richard Rodgers, C-major compromising in *Death and the Powers*. Machover's technological inventions in giving to sounds, through electronics, new sonorities, new eloquence, have been widely and amply acclaimed. The band of only 15, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, conducted by Gil Rose (September 25), could fill the theatre with rich 'grand-opera' sound when appropriate. But I'd like to stress, not so much the sonic and scenic marvels created by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab (whose Opera of the Future Group is directed by Machover), as what a good opera composer Machover is, bringing the 'traditional', necessary skills to a far from traditional work. He has a command of expressive vocal gesture. He sets words sensitively, with a feeling for the natural weight, stress, and length of syllables rare today. Voices and instrumental/electronic sound are well balanced, often with telling counterpoints. The scoring is colourful. The piece is well constructed: a four-character drama opens up in scene 6 with a visit from the outside world, a three-man delegation of tenor, baritone and bass. In scene 8 Miranda is overwhelmed by 'a parade of the World's miseries, the victims of famine, torture, crime, disease'; students and Monaco residents were enlisted for the powerful crowd scene. The final duet is a moving modern addition to the great line of father-daughter exchanges: *Boccanegra*-*Amelia*, *Rigoletto*-*Gilda*, even *Wotan*-*Brünnhilde*.

There was an expert cast. Across three performances, I heard James Maddalena as Powers develop from careful exact utterance to eloquent, lyrical delivery of his lines. Patricia Risley's Evvy was rather wonderful in a long erotic aria of reunion with the husband who has passed into 'the system'. Hal Cazalet was a brilliantly precise Nicholas, the enthusiastic young technician who has the scherzo (not buffo) episodes of the varied score. As Miranda (*Cordelia*, *Antigone*), Joëlle Harvey's lines were not always verbally shaped—notes took precedence of line—but she sang with sweet, pure tones and was radiant in the finale. The characters were sharply defined. Diana Paulus's staging and Alex McDowell's scenes were model: dazzling in their inventions but never 'self-promoting'. This was a grand, rich, deeply serious new opera, presented by a team with manifold, coherent accomplishments.