



## COT FTW: No Dearth of Power

[Evan K](#) on 04.04.11 at 10:12 AM | [no comments](#) |

It's been 2 days since I saw Tod Machover's *Death and the Powers* at Chicago Opera Theater, and I'm still thinking about it, even thoroughly reading the production notes from the supersized production team. Opera has a tradition of engaging artists from various disciplines, but *Death* goes over the top, bringing in engineers, roboticists, video programmers, poet laureates, and even a Hollywood [production designer](#).

You have to see it to believe it. And you have to see it. Believe it.

### **Époustouflant.**

The result is a richly dense work of art in which it is easy to be consumed, absorbed into the system, the form mimicking the content. And yet, at the very core, behind the façade of technology, there is something distinctly human.

Often times, opera asks big questions but steers clear of the big-big questions: big questions like love and death rather than big-big questions of mortality itself. Machover says the plot grew out of his interest in the aging process and the desire to leave something behind, a legacy. Every artist gives a little bit of themselves to future generations; glimpses of their personality can be found in every note, word, or brush stroke. But what if you could preserve your personality in its entirety?

Such is what Simon Powers does in *Death and the Powers*. As such he has power over death and such.

He becomes the Wizard of his own Oz, consumed by 3 3-ton towers of light, a sort of supercomputer of his embedded personality.

In the production, the video walls are controlled by sensors attached to the singer playing Simon: James Maddalena. You may have seen Maddalena in *Nixon in China*; he originated the role of Nixon and recently reprised it at the Met. His voice has both the richness and frailty that comes with age, embodying the ailing Powers as he seeks to transcend matter.

What is the matter with life? What is life without matter?

Simon transcends matter, becoming pure mind in the machine. Is it still him or is it a big trick? And should we follow him off the cliff into the void?

*Death and the Powers* takes us off that cliff and, while our belief is suspended in midair, asks these big-big questions. Do we fall back to earth or fly? The question is the question; it's a matter of matter.

I might even try to go see it again.

I admit it; I'm obsessed. Last night, I went to the "behind-the-technology" lecture with composer Tod Machover about his opera *Death and the Powers*. Though I had seen the opera and read about the technology behind it, it was fascinating seeing it in action.

If there is a flaw in *Death*, it's that it's too much to take in in one sitting. Even just geeking out on tech, it's impossible to appreciate how complicated it is. Machover said they wanted to keep technology out of the way, to merely use it as a tool to tell the story. They succeeded: almost to a flaw.

Let's start with the **robots**. It was impossible in the performance to tell how the robots were controlled. Were they autonomous or simply high-tech puppets? Does it really matter? Either way it's pretty amazing. As best as I can tell, the puppets were primarily controlled by puppeteers in the rafters with Xbox 360 controllers. And yet, they seem pretty autonomous and can respond to voice commands.

It's akin to seeing an "electroacoustic" or "computer music" performance. You hear these amazing things but don't know how they're doing it; in stark contrast to acoustic music or analog puppeteering. During the performance, though, it's easy to forget these things, and the robots seem like part of the set and part of the cast - at the same time.

**Disembodied performance.** After the first scene of the opera, the lead singer, James Maddalena, disappears from view, though his voice and even his image reappear throughout the rest of the show.

The audience can't tell where it's coming from: is it prerecorded? Boring. Is it something unimaginably high-tech? Awesome.

It turns out it's the latter. Maddalena leaves the stage to enter a sound-proof booth in the orchestra pit. He is hooked up to sensors to measure his breathing, arm movements (using accelerometers), and muscle tensions, all of which are transmitted to the video screens on stage, such that it becomes an extension of his performance. Think bio-suit. Think again of the Wizard of Oz.

They had a vision and invented myriad new technology. Any couple pieces of which could transform opera and performance in general. And will do so in years to come. With all of them woven together, it just takes a while to parse it out. Which is what I've been doing ever since Saturday--finally making some headway.

### **Death and the Powers at Chicago Opera Theater**

**April 6, 8** at 7:30pm

**April 10** at 3pm