



Robot opera less than meets the eye

BY ANDREW PATNER

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The future of opera is a hotly debated topic these days with the Metropolitan Opera's general manager Peter Gelb taking to the op-ed pages of the New York Times to defend his company's new emphasis on cinematic-style stagings and HD broadcasts to theaters around the country. Others have questioned what this means for the role of the human voice as opposed to production values and what movie-priced broadcasts do to performance troupes in smaller cities.

Chicago is not outside of these discussions, and its courageous second company Chicago Opera Theater fights each year for financial respect from area donors and offers productions and repertoire that can attract a younger and more diverse crowd than the mighty Lyric Opera of Chicago. In the right-sized Harris Theater and under visionary general director Brian Dickie, every offering is something new, whether from the 17th or 21st centuries.

With "Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera" by MIT Media Lab composer/inventor Tod Machover, COT goes a step further. The future of opera is one thing, but is there an opera of the future? Machover, whose work has ranged from a long stint at the Pierre Boulez-founded IRCAM center in Paris to developing the technology for the "Guitar Hero" video game to setting speculative fiction guru Philip K. Dick's work to music, thinks so and even has an Opera of the Future Group at his Cambridge, Mass., headquarters.

With a combination of patience, funding (initially spearheaded by a wealthy widow in Monaco, site of this opera's world premiere last fall), widespread connections and confidence, Machover, 57, has had a decade to get this work where he'd like it to be, and in that time some of the future is already now. Based on a story idea by Randy Weiner, husband of the work's director, COT stalwart Diane Paulus, the concept of a multi-billionaire cheating death by uploading himself into a computer system seems to parallel both current events and the rapid rise and time consumption of social media.

The ideas here are strong, and at an intermissionless 90 minutes and with a solid cast and surprisingly strong and beautifully integrated computerized lighting and staging effects, this is something anyone concerned with either the opera or the future in general ought to see.

But Machover and his librettist, the former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky, make some old-fashioned mistakes here along with their many accomplishments. The battle is not between

human scenes and those with narrating machines. It's that between didacticism and ambiguity, the latter which is so important to making a work of art, whether literary, musical or otherwise. The questions posed by the singers and, implicitly, the "Operabots" who appear to traverse the stage under their own power, are real ones: What are the distinctions between body, mind and soul? Is life made real by its finiteness or would we rather achieve immortality? Whom do we love more, our fellow man or our own "flesh and blood?"

But the constant repetition of these ideas in the text is banal and obvious. We're lacking in metaphor, indirection and development here. Veteran baritone James Maddalena has the title character Simon Powers down in all of his self-involvement. British tenor Hal Cazalet is all would-be mechanical joy as Simon's assistant Nicholas, although his scenes are a bit "Free To Be ... You and Me." Young American soprano Sara Heaton is a strong Miranda, Simon's daughter who resists leaving human life. But it's only really in Emily Albrink's scenes as Simon's "final wife" Evvy that we have both musical and theatrical originality as she listens to the music of Simon's digital spheres over her headphones and hums eerily along with the orchestra. David Kravitz, Tom McNichols and Douglas Dodson offer good support as representatives of the outside world, suffering from Simon's shenanigans.

The music is performed live by 15 members of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project under the direction of Gil Rose, and all parts are quite carefully amplified. To credit all of the technical hands would take pages, but the geometric Operabots, created by MIT students with Hollywood production designer Alex McDowell, have a strange, even personal beauty about them, something that is lacking in Machover's score, more an accompaniment to his many ideas than a realization of them.

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