

## Review: DEATH AND THE POWERS, THE ROBOTS' OPERA by Tod Machover at Chicago Opera Theater

by [Viola da Voce](#) on April 6, 2011

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What do you get when you combine incredible singers, dynamic music, and a chorus of robotic Operabots? A jaw-dropping performance of [Tod Machover](#)'s *Death and the Powers, The Robots' Opera* at the [Chicago Opera Theater](#) (COT). Contrapuntist and I attended the Midwest premiere of this opera on April 2 at the Harris Theater, thanks to tickets generously provided by COT.

The 90-minute performance transports the audience on an intense cerebral journey driven by a rhythmic score, profound libretto, and cutting-edge technology. Despite its brain-bending philosophy, the libretto also provides clever wordplay and deadpan humor from the emotionally ignorant Operabots.

*Death and the Powers* was created by Machover and his Opera of the Future group at the MIT Media Lab in association with COT and American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) Set to a libretto by former U. S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, the opera tells the story of Simon Powers, a wealthy inventor who extends his existence beyond the decay of his body by downloading himself into an artificial environment called The System. His friends and family then struggle to choose between living in the chaotic real world and joining Powers in his ethereal "world of light".

The opera employs innovative technology. A technique called “Disembodied Performance” uses sensors and analysis software to translate James Maddalena’s (Simon Powers) sounds and gestures into the behavior of the animatronic set. Machover and his production team are present at the performance and manipulate the technology throughout the opera to refine the live concert experience. The previously mentioned “Operabots”, electronic bookcases with multicolored flickering lights, and a musical chandelier also add new technological dimensions to the story.

It may seem that the special effects would overpower the singers and result in a cold performance. In fact, the technology contributes to key thematic questions of the opera. Can Simon Powers maintain his personality and emotions once he has left his mortal body and entered The System? Is the essence of a person’s soul directly connected to his flesh?



The opera’s formidable cast accomplishes incredible vocal performances and impressive physical feats. James Maddalena’s (Powers) rich baritone voice is flexible enough to display emotion in its “flesh” form and disembodied thoughtfulness as The System form. Hal Cazalet (Nicholas) perfects his role as Powers’ partially mechanical assistant Nicholas, who subtly manipulates the technology of The System. Emily Albrink (Evvy) shines as the mourning wife whose sanity disintegrates once her husband crosses into his world of light. Sara Heaton (Miranda) blazes with raw emotion as she struggles to choose between humanity and The System.

Three scenes feature outstanding vocal and emotional performances. In Scene 2’s “System Soliloquy”, Maddalena portrays Simon’s gradual transformation into The System. Maddalena rolls, contorts, and undulates on the floor while maintaining perfect vocal control. By the end of the scene, Simon’s human body has completely disappeared into the flickering electronic bookcases of The System.



Scene 4 features Albrink's eerie portrayal of Evvy's sensual encounter with The Chandelier. In the middle of the night, Evvy communicates with a musical Chandelier. Inhabited by Simon's personality, The Chandelier descends to the floor like a giant metallic butterfly which opens and closes its wings as Evvy strokes its strings. When she cries out for Simon to touch her, The Chandelier rises back up to the ceiling as Evvy writhes in ecstasy.

Scene 8 features the most powerful moment of the opera. In a final confrontation, The System produces a simulation of Simon's human body. He tries to convince Miranda (Heaton) to evolve out of the "meat" of the real world and join him in the light of The System. Heaton's emotional performance effectively expresses rage, confusion, and loneliness. The scene culminates as she sings a soaring high note which raised every hair on my body.

The remaining performances of Death and The Powers will take place April 6, 8, and 10.