90.9wburQ&A: Opera Of The Future, Starring (What Else?) Robots!

- By [Andrea Shea](#)
- Sep 26, 2010, 11:12 AM UPDATED 9/27

"Death and the Powers" -- a new opera by Tod Machover (Courtesy of Opera of the Future)

BOSTON — What would an "Opera of the Future" be like without robots? We may never know, because it seems the future is here.

Composer Tod Machover's ambitious science fiction work, "Death and the Powers," ([see the promo video](#)) premiered in Monaco this weekend. The pioneering MIT professor developed the music — and a chorus of robots — with the [Opera of the Future](#) group at the school's cutting-edge Media Lab.

"Death and the Powers" is being billed as "the 'Avatar' of the Opera world." The creative team behind it includes: former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, who wrote the libretto; Diane Paulis, of the American Repertory Theater, who directs; and Alex McDowell, known for working on visually rich films such as "Minority Report" and "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," is the production's designer.

"Death and the Powers" is the tale of a brilliant, dying inventor who decides he needs somewhere permanent to put his vast unconsciousness before expiring to the great beyond. So he does what any obsessive techie would: he uploads them into "intelligent" objects and calls this repository "The System."

Sounds pretty weird, right? It's nothing if not contemporary.

To find out more about Machover's ground-breaking creation — and its robots — I e-mailed the composer a few questions in the days leading up to the premiere. From Monaco, here are his answers, lightly edited:

AS: Why is the opera being premiered in Monaco?

TM: Projects tend to start in unusual ways, and this one was no exception. About 12 years ago, a woman named Kawther Al-Abood showed up at my office at the MIT Media Lab. She had just become board director of the Monte-Carlo Opera and wanted to commission an unusual piece that would draw new audiences to opera, would integrate new technology and would create a buzz for Monaco as a center for innovation, a reputation it had 100 years ago when Diaghilev, Stravinsky and Nijinsky created many of their innovations in this very opera house, but not something associated with Monaco now.

Various people had told her to look me up, we liked each other immediately — not least because she wanted to know if I'd think about staging the Finale on the Mediterranean itself (and I knew I'd met my match), and we started talking about what eventually became "Death and the Powers." Kawther got Prince Albert II interested in the opera — he is the honorary patron and will host the gala premiere on (Sept. 24) — and we have planned this Monaco premiere since that time.

Just to be clear, how do you describe "Death and the Powers" plot?

"Death and the Powers" is a story about Simon Powers, a rich, successful, powerful and eccentric man who is reaching the end of his life. In fact, he has had enough of the world and wants to leave, but wants everything about himself to remain, including his memories and experiences, his ability to communicate with loved ones, the possibility of manipulating his business affairs, but also a chance to leave his body and all normally human things.

With the help of his assistant, Nicholas, he invents The System which indeed allows him to download himself into his surroundings. He turns The System on at the end of the first scene and disappears into it. Those who remain — his wife, daughter and colleagues — must decide if The System — walls, books, Chandelier, robots and all — is really him, if they like him in this form,

if something is missing, if The System is a better form of existence that they should follow, or if they should remain human, warts and all.

The story is framed by a robot Prologue and Epilogue: the entire opera has been left sometime in the future when there are no more humans, and the robots have been requested to perform the show — like a medieval Mystery Play — to learn about being human. Commenting at the end, they still don't understand key concepts like "body", "meat" and "death."

From what I've read it's pretty weird. Have people said that to you before?

The story is definitely unusual and imaginative, but it is also direct, emotional, quite funny and — I think — moving. What interests me most in this story is Simon Powers' struggle to shape and transmit his legacy, to sum up his life, to preserve the detail and texture of his experience and to share that eternally with his loved ones. On the other side, it poses the question of just how much of our lives can we share, not just as a legacy but day-to-day and moment-to-moment. If we could preserve and transfer everything about ourselves, or if we could live forever for that matter, would the world want that? Would anyone care? Having a chorus of robots on stage and walls and furniture that "come alive" through the magic of technology, forces us to confront our human limits and also to embrace the special qualities that — after all — people will always possess.

I'm not a huge opera fanatic/expert, but I'm aware of productions and trends in the genre. Even so, I have to ask: has anyone ever created and staged a sci-fi opera with robots before?

I've done some pretty unusual operas before — like "VALIS," based on one of Philip K. Dick's last sci-fi masterpieces and the "Brain Opera," which invites audiences to collaborate in creating each performance — but I think "Powers" takes the cake. I don't think there is another opera that features the stage as the main character or that has dancing, singing (and) acting robots. Probably won't be the last, though!

Let's talk about the robots. They were developed at the MIT lab. What exactly do they do on stage? Do they sing?

I'm proud and pleased to say that the robots — we call them OperaBots — were designed by our production director Alex McDowell, and engineered, tested and built entirely at the MIT Media Lab, mostly by students. A remarkable achievement by some very talented young people. The OperaBots frame the opera — as mentioned above — by accepting to perform this inherited story. Once the story starts, they are almost always on stage, reacting to live performers, commenting on the action, being the playthings or "pets" of Nicholas, Simon Powers' assistant who built them and being sort of intermediaries between the humans and The System. They are not exactly individual characters, but they do have individualized choreographies and behaviors, gliding and twisting about, flashing and modulating light and — indeed — singing from time to time.

Most importantly, perhaps, do the robots have feelings?

That's a more complicated question. The OperaBots have "character" — they are fun, interesting, engaged, energetic — but they do not understand the kinds of questions that give meaning and texture to human lives: relationships, time, touch, sacrifice. They care about the actions of the human characters, but they do not have the kind of motivations that underlie Simon Powers' final confrontation with his daughter Miranda, where he pleads with her to enter The System with him, and she must decide what she would gain or lose by doing so.

I understand the actors wear "disembodied performance" gear. What is that?

"Disembodied performance" refers to the fact that Powers — played by the great baritone James Maddalena — does in fact play most of the show without his body; that is, once he enters The System at the end of Scene 1, Jim is off stage (I won't divulge where) but all of his actions and feelings are measured, analyzed and translated so that the entire stage vibrates with his presence. We measure many aspects of Jim's performance, both elements that he consciously controls like his voice and hand gestures, as well as many less conscious elements like his breathing, muscle tension and overall body gesture. All of these characteristics are combined and give an uncanny sense that the non-human physical environment on stage has come alive, that Simon is really there, and that we are in the presence of — in fact are very very close to — a human being.

What's the point of this opera? What inspired you to create it?

Works of art do not have one single point or message. But two underlying inspirations behind this project were, first, how to allow technology to enhance human presence and communication on stage, as opposed to the huge distancing that happens more and more in mega-spectacle rock concerts where ugly, loud sound is pushed from the stage and performers look like ants against giant TV screens.

And I wanted to explore the possibility and poignancy of what is easy and what is hard to communicate between any two people — and especially across generations. And I wanted to create a journey where these questions and feelings would come alive through memorable melodies, unusual sonic textures, and pulsating rhythms… with the help of a few robots.

I can only imagine how challenging the preparations have been for this opera. It must add a new layer of complexity to "tech" rehearsals. (Tech rehearsals occur in the final days before most live productions and focus on lighting, sound and other production elements that need to be tweaked and set before performance).

The goal of any live performance, of course, is to lead the audience to concentrate on the experience itself, on the ideas and feelings, i.e. to make the "making" of the performance — and in this case all the crazy technology — look simple and inevitable. But you are absolutely right; this is one of the most complex stage shows ever mounted, with numerous individual elements that must work with precision, delicacy, force and beauty, and — even more — truly a "system" of interacting machines that must function together in the most unbelievable ways. It is a testament to the amazing Powers team that for those who don't know, it does look easy. For those of us behind the scenes, it is quite another story of course

What's been the biggest challenge in making this a reality? Any "uh-oh" moments? I would imagine it's odd for the performers to play against machines?

I've got to say that there were an especially large number of challenges with this opera, from finding the resources to create it, to keeping a large and diverse team focused and energized over a rather long time, to imagining how to create a believable "System" on stage, to creating music that makes this vision come alive. It has definitely been a challenge for our performers to truly interact with all the machines on stage, but they are doing an amazing job. And the robots are adapting quite remarkably as well!

How do you expect hard-core opera lovers to respond to "Death and the Powers?"

It is always hard to predict how anyone will respond to a new piece, especially one as "different" as "Death and the Powers." I always imagine quite carefully what it is like to experience my works while I am creating them. (I spend time just listening and feeling what it would be like to be in the concert hall or opera house when the piece is performed.) But I know this is just my response, one that I believe in deeply, but is not necessarily how someone else will experience the work. This isn't selfish; it is just an honest use of the only pair of ears — and internal imaginings — that I have.

I hope that hard-core opera lovers will be intrigued and excited by the new look, texture and feel of this piece; that they will be captivated and engaged by the human questions explored in the story and Robert Pinsky's marvelous, brilliant, surprising text; that they will be amazed by the unbelievable performances — by humans and machines — directed by Diane Paulus and choreographed by Karole Armitage. And I hope that amidst the fluid, layered, ever-changing sonic palette, they will find melodies to hum, textures to feel and sweeping gestures that will take them places they may never have imagined.

Lastly, are you ready for the big premiere?

Well, the robots, walls and chandelier made it across the Atlantic and into the Monaco Opera House and were starting to buzz, hum and shimmer this afternoon. The singers all arrived this morning and start rehearsing shortly. The very sophisticated sound system is almost ready to start its tune-up routine. And the orchestra — Boston's own BMOP, conducted by Gil Rose — arrives on Saturday, ready to mix acoustics with my many layers of "hyper"-music. I am sure we will have surprises over the coming week, but as of now, it feels like we are where we want to be, having dreamed about this for years and trained extremely hard for months. I think we're good! I think it's good.

"Death and the Powers" premiered Friday, Sept. 24, at l'Operas de Monte-Carlo in Monaco. It will be staged at the A.R.T. in Cambridge in March 2011.