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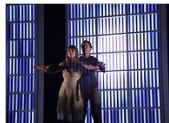
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Opera With Atmosphere of Brave New World

By JONATHAN LEVI,

MONTE CARLO — The view from a seat in the parterre of the Salle Garnier in Monte Carlo is well-nigh perfect. The windows on one side of this [opera](#) house look out onto a Mediterranean of fiberglass yachts and a twilight blue of photo perfection. From the ceiling of the auditorium, pastel gods and nymphs peer down into the nips and tucks of the Russians and Malaysians and Italians and Americans who have forsaken the one-armed pleasures of the casino next door for the more classical rewards of a night at the opera.



Miranda (Joëlle Harvey) and Nicholas (Hal Cazalet) in “Death and the Powers” in Monaco in September.

So it is not surprising that this Shangri-La-by-the-Sea should host the world premiere of an opera about perfection and perfectability. But the low hum that greets the audience in the Salle Garnier comes not from the inboard motors of massive yacht but from the meditative electronics of nine robots, waiting patiently for the audience to take their seats.

“Death and the Powers” is the latest opera by the American composer and inventor [Tod Machover](#). For the past 25 years, Mr. Machover, with the energy of a cherub and the hairdo of a mad professor, has been playing with music and technology from the high-voltage incubators at the [M.I.T. Media Lab](#), in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His mating of classical instruments with computer technology has led to developments like a hypercello played by [Yo-Yo Ma](#), a hyperfiddle designed for the virtuoso [Joshua Bell](#) and the technology that helped create Guitar Hero, the music video game.

But over the same years, Mr. Machover has retained his enthusiasm for classical composition. From his 1987 adaptation of [Philip K. Dick's](#) sci-fi classic "Valis" to his 1999 version of Tolstoy's "Resurrection" with a libretto by the American playwright Laura Harrington, Mr. Machover has searched like a scientist to find the right music to unlock each of his subjects. Mr. Machover's "Valis," commissioned for the 10th anniversary of the Pompidou Center, used speech and song and synthesizer to dramatize the hero's own fragmented view of the world. His "Resurrection" commanded the forces of the Houston Grand Opera to plumb the drama of a very 19th-century search for salvation.

Mr. Machover conceived "Death and the Powers" nearly 10 years ago as a project to marry 19th-century lyricism and humanism to 21st-century invention. He began with questions that were technological and spiritual: Can we store who we are in such a way that we will continue to inhabit the earth long after our bodies have turned to dust? How many gajigabytes make up a life? Where would our spirits live? Inside a computer? Inside the very walls of our homes? And how can one write an opera where the set is the living, breathing hero?

Mr. Machover's enthusiasm for his project brought him into contact with engineers who initially built piston-powered mock-ups of "living walls" that "breathed" in time to the singer — an idea he rejected when the noise of the thousands of pistons overwhelmed the music. But over the decade, the composer assembled a formidable set of collaborators, including the stage director Diane Paulus and the former U.S. [poet laureate Robert Pinsky](#).

Mr. Pinsky's libretto for "Death and the Powers" tells the story of the "gajillionaire" Simon Powers, whose ambition is to cheat death more completely than any of the lotus eaters of the Côte d'Azur. Powers, with the aid of his assistant, Nicholas, creates The System, into which he feeds his life, in preparation for the moment when his body will finally run out of juice.

To a story he devised with the playwright Randy Weiner, Mr. Pinsky set his libretto in a time when robots rule the earth. It opens with nine robots that have gathered together to recite a story about a concept they cannot understand: death. Like children at a [Passover Seder](#) or a Christmas pageant, they ask questions about this incomprehensible phenomenon. Like children, they dutifully proceed to re-enact a drama that their human creators long ago commanded them to re-enact every year.

Watching robots sing opera while they navigate the stage is entertaining for about five minutes. And fortunately Robot Leader has the wit to announce that any robot that takes

on the role of a human being will receive “1,000 Human Status Credits.” And so, to the accompaniment of flashing lights and video projections, four lucky robots metamorphose into Simon Powers; his third wife, Evvy; his daughter, Miranda; and Nicholas, the assistant. The story begins.

Mr. Pinsky is a poet who knows his gods but also a lot about the seamier crevices of men and women. As poet laureate in the late 1990s, he harnessed the popularity of his very American translation of Dante’s “Inferno” to create the Favorite Poem Project, in which he recorded the favorite poems of Americans, from a president reading Emerson to a construction worker reading Whitman. His libretto is sprinkled with allusions to some of these favorite poems, as his hero shores himself against ruin with quotes from [W.B. Yeats’s](#) “Sailing to Byzantium,” itself a meditation on aging and immortality, to May Swenson’s agnostic cry to the body in “Question.”

Mr. Pinsky is also a great jokester, a lover of puns, a supreme ironist and a serious carnivore, a lover of the meaty consonants and diphthongs of that Anglo-Teutonic goulash we call English. Composers will tell you, however, that it is easier to build a singing robot than to sing ironically. And consonants? Vowels are the bread and butter of bel canto singers. Consonants are the broccoli, best shoveled to the side of the plate or fed to the dog when no one’s listening.

Not that the seven human singers on stage don’t do their darnedest to enunciate and emote. But they have been set a Promethean task. “Death and the Powers” is less a dramatic opera than an oratorio of ideas. The singers are left to act ideas rather than emotions, to sing out to either the audience or to robots — a class of performers, along with children and animals, that W.C. Fields would surely have avoided.

For the better part of the opera, which runs 90 minutes, Powers, the protagonist, disappears from the scene into The System. As played by James Maddalena, Simon is a thousand-watt character, full of wit, humor and power. But once he is gone from the stage and replaced with thousands of blinking circuits, the light is dimmer.

Patricia Risley as Evvy communes with Simon in a wonderfully sexy hum and even contrives to make high-voltage love to him as Simon’s spirit inhabits a giant chandelier. Hal Cazalet as Nicholas, Simon’s assistant, who is rescued from the ravages of physical ailments by Simon’s technological genius, leaps around the stage commanding robots and the three giant light walls of the set like a Wagnerian Nibelung. And most movingly, Joëlle Harvey as

Simon's daughter, Miranda, searches for her father's spirit like a Shakespearean innocent, with a simple, effortless soprano.

Briefly, a trio of bureaucrats appears to complain to the disappeared Simon that his disappearance is wreaking havoc among the nations and the peoples of the world. While the composer plumbs the depths and the heights of the male larynx with the oceanic bass of Tom McNichols and the piercing counter tenor of Frank Kelley, the dramatic challenge of singing to walls of flashing lights — even walls beautifully crafted by movie designer Alex McDowell — is enormous.

Mr. Machover has fashioned an elaborate mechanism to link Simon's offstage voice to the set. Yet, while the set might react like a human being, in the end, it just isn't one. While the technological triumph of linking voice to stage, and the acoustical instruments of the excellent orchestra — conducted admirably by Gil Rose — to the synthesized instruments of Mr. Machover's creation, is impressive, we are all children of "Star Wars," inured to special effects far more impressive on-screen. Mr. Machover and the scores of talented students who worked with him have invented magical machines. But the very message of the opera, that human emotions are not programmable or easily replicated no matter how soft the software, is also its pitfall.

Perhaps the greatest triumph of "Death and the Powers" is educational. Like a latter-day Prospero himself, Mr. Machover has brought a wealthy Arab sponsor and the prince of Monaco together with a team of dozens of students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has introduced electronic music to an audience frightened by anything more radical than Puccini, and has created a passion for live, sung music theater in a gaggle of students who were suckled on a diet of computer games and sci-fi movies.

"Death and the Powers" will sail across the Atlantic to the American Repertory Theater this autumn and then land in Chicago in the spring. Along the way, Mr. Machover and Ms. Paulus, the stage director, may tinker with intelligibility and drama. Most happily, they will introduce new generations of Mirandas to the Brave New Worlds of art and technological possibility.