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Opera gets a Machover

Experimental classical composer Tod Machover brings his groundbreaking collaboration between classical musicians and digital artists to town

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Dream machine: Tod Machover with one of his instruments (Gino Sprio)

You may not have heard of Tod Machover, but he has probably changed your life, and will probably do it again. You can't say that of many experimental classical composers, but then not many of them have just premiered an opera whose lavish set is actually a complicated and unique musical instrument that can be stroked, tickled and muffled into expressing the musicality of an offstage singer in wholly novel ways.

The opera is Death and the Powers, and it tells the story of a dying billionaire who wants to download his personality into his house. It uses surround-sound ambisonics, via the world's longest, thinnest speaker, to fill the theatre while still appearing to come from a pinpoint position on the stage. The project is typical Machover. As he himself says: "I suppose by now I have achieved a certain prominence — when people are considering a project some composers might think is wacky, they often seem to think it might be something for me."

As well as being a visiting professor of composition at the Royal Academy of Music, Machover is a founding professor of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab. His teams there have designed instruments for everybody from untrained musicians to Yo-Yo Ma, for whom they created a "hypercello".

Their innovations have led to the creation of the computer-game phenomeno Guitar Hero, as well as safety devices now standard in child car seats. On Friday in Aldeburgh, Machover will present new work written over 10 days as part of Faster Than Sound, a groundbreaking collaboration between classical musicians and digital artists; the concert will be repeated on Saturday in London.

Machover is comfortable working at the intersection of traditionally different worlds. His life story is almost comically appropriate. His mother is a Juilliard-trained pianist from a highbrow artistic family on the East Coast; his father is a computer graphics pioneer from a pop-culture-loving Midwest family. He splits his time between the high-tech Media Lab and the barn of his 18th-century farmhouse. When he talks about the lab, it seems as if it was built for him. Given that he has been one of its guiding lights since its inception 25 years ago, perhaps the truth is more that it was, at least in part, built by him.

"It was," he says, "designed to be the most interdisciplinary place in the world." Unlike Ircam, the Paris-based institute where he was director of musical research, and where people stuck to their own specialisms, the Media Lab encourages wide-ranging collaboration. "The technology we've developed for this opera is about transmitting human gesture through time and space, which has obvious implications for live entertainment," he says. "But it's not always the most obvious things that are the most influential. Nobody here set out to design a car seat for kids."

Blue-sky research of this kind is such a small field that a few individuals can have a huge influence. Machover is quick to point out that the visionaries who found and fund institutions that give creators somewhere to flourish can be as important as the creators.

Tod Machover says he wants to connect participatory culture to a culture of excellence (Gino Sprio)

The Media Lab was founded by Nicholas Negroponte and Jerome Wiesner, a scientific advisor to JFK and Lyndon Johnson. They believed America could only have a deeply relevant scientific culture by including the arts. Their consistent vision built an organisation whose unusual funding structure attracts the best brains from industry without giving industry control over how the money is spent or the resulting intellectual property. "It is an incredibly rich, liberating environment," Machover says. "I honestly believe that more practical benefits will result from this opera than from an equivalent spend on traditional research."

He is similarly effusive about Kawther Al-Abood, who first contacted him when she was president of the board at the Monte Carlo Opera in 1999. She was passionately concerned with the future of opera, and had seen Brain Opera, his 1996 piece in which the audience experiment on novel instruments, then trained musicians incorporate the audience's experiments into a longer, more coherent piece. Machover was quickly convinced of Al-Abood's boldness; they were both concerned about what legacy they might pass to their children. And that is the fundamental subject of Death and the Powers: the desire of one man to connect with other generations through technology.

Finding new ways to connect is also fundamental to this week's Aldeburgh project. Faster Than Sound's producer, Joana Seguro, is another visionary Machover admires. "I want to find ways to present electronic music that aren't just some guy with a laptop," she says. She is putting Machover in a room with the visual-arts collective UnitedVisualArtists and the cellist Peter Gregson.

For Machover, connection is the dream, and a game like Guitar Hero is part of a culture of participation. He now wants to connect that participatory culture to a culture of excellence. How can technology help people to produce music that is more than a game, that is also beautiful and interesting? Death and the Powers is a perfect emblem for Machover's overall project. The side effects are hard to predict, but you might well see them at every rock gig or festival you go to five years from now, or every time you turn on your smartphone.

Faster Than Sound, Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, Fri; Kings Place, N1, Sat

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