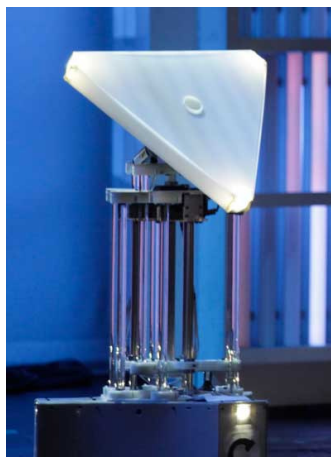


The Boston Musical Intelligencer

March 15, 2011

Machover, Touching with Sound

by [Bettina A. Norton](#)



An Operabot (Jonathan Williams photo)

Lloyd Schwartz, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic of *The Boston Phoenix*, stands for musical excellence, and most tellingly, the drama of humanity well portrayed in music. So it is that he once wrote of composer Tod Machover, “What might be most exciting about Machover’s pieces in general is how beautiful and moving they are, what lyrical and exotic melismas keep surfacing (and how scintillatingly they contrast with the shattering electronic textures), how dramatically they build, how they have not a dull moment, and what magnificent opportunities for performers they provide.”

The *LA Times*, in an obvious pun, called Machover “America’s most wired composer.” True enough: his music, a synthesis of acoustic and electronic sound, not only leaves behind traditional artistic and cultural boundaries but incorporates numerous contemporary musical genres. He has expanded the notion of what constituted music, in the way, perhaps, that Charles Ives did earlier in the twentieth century, providing auditory awareness in a musical vocabulary of what surrounds us.



The Musical Chandelier engages in a sensuous duet with Simon Powers' wife, Evvy, mezzo-soprano Patricia Risley (Jill Steinberg photo)

(The Ives analogy aside, Machover's teachers were Elliott Carter and Roger Sessions.)

Having composed pieces for amplified cello and live electronics, Hyperpiano with orchestra and interactive graphics, computer sounds and animated texts, and other electronic wonders, Machover, most noted for his operatic productions, has written a new one, *Death and the Powers*, which has its American premiere next Friday, March 18, at the Cutler Majestic in Boston. It is a joint project of the MIT Media Lab and American Repertory Theatre, with the Chicago Opera Theater, where it goes in early April. The director is ART's Diane Paulus and conductor, Gil Rose.

Machover is understandably excited about this project, which he has been working on practically around the clock, this week. Asked to explain how his Hyperinstruments, which he launched in 1986, use "smart" computers to enhance composition, Machover replied, "Since I was a kid in the '60s, I was intrigued with how one could perform in real time such previously studio-only masterpieces like Stockhausen's *Kontakte* or The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's*, so as to combine technological richness and precision with the spontaneity and gestuality of live human expression.

"All of our Hyperinstruments — whether for virtuosi like Yo-Yo Ma and Prince, to the kinds of general public instruments that led to *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, or environments we design for children or in a therapeutic context — use technology to capture the intention and feeling of a performance, meet the musician at his or her level (augmenting skills and circumventing limitations), and attempt to translate natural musicality into the richest possible result."



Simon Powers, James Maddalena about to download himself into The System (John Williams photo)

How he did, or did not, incorporate ideas of his former teachers, Elliott Carter and Roger Sessions. And is there any affinity with Ives and his appropriating the sounds all around us into music?

“I think I already had a fairly developed compositional voice when I first went to Juilliard, so both Sessions and Carter helped me to listen even more closely to my own intuitions and follow my musical passions (both men were brilliant *and* intuitive, in my view, highly analytical but never didactic) wherever they might lead. I have always had a primal melodic instinct — perhaps from being a cellist — and Sessions was a great model for allowing melodies to develop fully and to keep their integrity and independence. And Carter simply has the most unpredictable and vivacious musical mind I have encountered. Besides learning much about non-tonal but functional harmony and complex but limpid textures, I also was inspired to look at every single musical situation with an unbiased, creative and joyful eye (and ear). Carter never makes a decision by rote or habit, and whenever I find myself doing so I think of him looking over my shoulder.

“As for Ives, I wasn’t much of a fan growing up — as a student I always preferred Schoenberg, that other 1874 baby — but have come to admire Ives enormously as a composer and a man over the years. Perhaps there is no one who I feel closer to, in the way that he felt impelled to explore without a map, to pull all sounds together in a new kind of unity, and to imagine the highest possible impact that music can have on individuals and societies. He is such an inspiration for all these things, and paid a price by pursuing difficult ideas to the most consequent conclusions. Then again, we know increasingly that Ives was a more complex figure than he appeared on the surface.....but then so am I, I suppose.”

Poet Laureate Emeritus Robert Pinsky, noted for his skillful, melodic verse translation of Dante's *Inferno*, from *La Divina Commedia*, is librettist for the opera. Pinsky has written that he was inspired by the flow and tension of jazz and the excitement that it made him feel, an incredible experience that he has tried to reproduce in his poetry.

Pinsky was chosen by Machover, he explained, because, "... when I started thinking about *Death and the Powers*, I had two simultaneous ideas. One was that I wanted the stage to come alive — physically — to help tell a story, while being shaped and "inhabited" by human presence in much the same way that my Hyperinstruments do for sound. At the same time, I was thinking a lot about mortality and legacy, and how the intricate, essential texture of any human life can be fully shared — let alone passed down through generations — from one person to another. Before having a story for the opera, I had a sense that this piece would have mythic qualities, would need a fluidity of text which would let objects 'speak', and that I would need to find a new kind of flexibility —for me — between words and music.



The Miseries surrounding and swirling Miranda, soprano Joëlle Harvey (John Williams photo)

"In the past, I have often gone to novels or novelists for my opera texts. Philip K. Dick for *VALIS* and Tolstoy for *Resurrection*, for example. But felt that I needed to work with the poet for this project, to explore the qualities mentioned above. I had been an admirer of Robert Pinsky's work for years, greatly appreciating the combination of intelligence, precision, lyricism, directness and musicality of his work. I called him out of the blue, we had coffee together in Cambridge, and he agreed to work with me on what turned out to be *Powers*. It was definitely a leap of faith on his part!"

Once again, the legacy of the musical talent of Emmanuel Music rises to the fore of some of the most provocative, musically rewarding, performances heard throughout the world in the last

twenty years. Emmanuel alumnus James Maddalena, who has starred as Nixon in John Adams's Nixon in China since its debut in Houston in 1987 and most recently at the Met, has a prominent role, along with Emmanuel Music's still-present light, tenor Frank Kelley.

BMInt's publisher Lee Eiseman heard Machover on WBUR earlier this week opine that every opera production looks old-fashioned, that opera needs to be more like movies, TV, computers, ... so Machover was asked if he really thinks that conventional opera is dead.

"I actually think that opera is one of the most dynamic, exciting and promising artistic forms at present. It brings together story, character, words, visuals, objects, and public communion, all with music at the center. In a city like London, opera is flourishing in unexpected ways and places, such as with the world's first 3D opera transmissions, Anna Nicole Smith (or someone playing her) at Covent Garden, and the brilliant Punchdrunk staging a new ENO production in a giant warehouse where no member of the audience experiences the same spectacle.

"On the other hand, many huge institutions have been built up to preserve operatic forms and conventions of the past, and these structures are often difficult to move or modify. I think that by going back to the roots of what opera was always meant to be — passionately human stories, expressed through amazing music, presented via the most effective techniques and technologies available — we will find that the best and most exciting work is yet to come."