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Full-Bodied Arias in a Postorganic World

By HEIDI WALESON

Boston

Composer Tod Machover heads the Opera of the Future project at MIT's Media Lab, and that term nicely describes his "Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera," which was given its U.S. premiere by the American Repertory Theater in Boston last week. It is clearly recognizable as opera: It has a story and characters, and its full-blooded arias, elegantly illuminating the apt (if occasionally self-conscious) text by the poet Robert Pinsky, are sung with passionate intensity by humans. The "future" part is embodied both in the orchestral writing, which skillfully combines acoustic and electronic music to create a remarkable range of colors and levels, and in the staging: not just the rather charming robots that grow, shrink and whiz around the stage, but the way that technology creates the playing environment, even allowing the main character's performance to influence and animate the set.

Jonathan Williams

Emily Albrink as Evvy in the U.S. premiere of Tod Machover's opera.

Technique relates to theme. The opera is about what it means to be human, and what technology adds or subtracts. Simon Powers, a dying billionaire, has devised a "System" whereby his consciousness is uploaded into the walls and the objects of his room, enabling him to live forever without his body. As Simon, the fine baritone James Maddalena spent much of the opera singing from the orchestra pit, wearing sensors that measured his movements and his breathing and used that information to alter the light and movement of the principal set pieces. The drama comes from his family's reactions to this disembodied being who surrounds them as a voice, a Teflon-strung, bird-like chandelier, and tall "bookcases" of flashing, trembling, color-changing lights.

Simon's assistant and surrogate son, Nicholas, is the quintessential tech geek, an avid evangelist for the System and a true believer in replacing "meat" with "metal." Simon's "third and favorite" wife, Evvy, responds to his transformation with dreamy eroticism. Only his daughter, Miranda, cannot get past the loss of physicality and is appalled by the eternal Simon's total lack of compassion for suffering and imperfection. Miranda's resistance to the idea of a perfected, "post-organic" world is futile: Simon's story is framed with a prologue and epilogue for four robots in a postapocalyptic time, who dutifully enact the piece as a required historical artifact. The robots do not know what death or suffering means and thus, the opera suggests, the essence of humanity has been lost forever.

Mr. Machover clearly delineated each of the characters with music, and the excellent cast was affecting and persuasive. Mr. Maddalena infused Simon with a rich man's arrogance, whether he was physically on stage or off. As Nicholas, tenor Hal Cazalet sang bright, eager scherzos. Evvy (soprano Emily Albrink) was all lush sensuality, singing "Touch me" as she strummed the Simon-chandelier that moved to surround her and an electronic Simon voice-layer purred in response. (All the singers and acoustic instruments were amplified, and the chandelier's sound needed more presence in the mix.) As Miranda, Sara Heaton's high soprano, often accompanied by the acoustic instruments without electronic overlay, conveyed innocence and sorrow—and, finally, a richer weight for her blossoming as an idealist. Three visitors from "the World"—ranging from deep bass (Tom McNichols) to a vivid countertenor (Douglas Dodson), with a fine baritone (David Kravitz) in between—became an almost-comic trio as they fruitlessly importuned Simon to use his wealth to rescue the fast-deteriorating planet. Conductor Gil Rose ably coordinated these disparate musical forces, welding the 90-minute, intermission-free opera into a strong dramatic arc.

Director Diane Paulus, production designer Alex McDowell, lighting designer Donald Holder, costume designer David C. Woolard and choreographer Karole Armitage created a stage picture and movement patterns in which humans and machines had an eerie union. The "bookcases" —three triangular set pieces that moved and turned choreographically—became canvases for the disembodied Simon's feelings expressed through light, changing from throbbing, heavily saturated reds and yellows to the most delicate, unwavering pastels. Their emotional intensity felt as vivid and present as the feelings of the actual humans. The robots, with their triangular, tilting "heads" and lights, took on a faintly anthropomorphic character in the prologue and epilogue; during the story part, they were staged as Nicholas's toys, moving around at his command. The robots' cluelessness balanced the work's serious theme with comedy—we take ourselves so seriously, the opera seems to say, but this is how it will all end.

Ten years in the making, "Death and the Powers," which had its premiere at the Opéra de Monte Carlo in September and goes to Chicago Opera Theater in April, boasts a lengthy credit list of computer designers, researchers and technicians. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about it, however, is how seamlessly the technology and the music worked together, so that all that hardware and software was about the people and the story, not about itself.

Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.