



## Cue the robots – opera for the digital era arrives at COT

John von Rhein Classical music critic

*9:38 a.m. CDT, March 27, 2011*

If technology should ever allow us to achieve a kind of digital immortality, what effect will this have on our loved ones, not to mention the moral and social order? That's just one of the Deep Questions posed by Tod Machover's sci-fi fantasy, "Death and the Powers, the Robots' Opera," which, in its Midwest premiere, will launch Chicago Opera Theater's spring festival season Saturday night at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance.

Ironically, the composer's cautionary tale of technological hubris is crammed with technology.

The sophisticated electronic gadgetry, designed by Alex McDowell (of [Steven Spielberg](#) film fame), includes a dozen singing "operabots," robots that respond to an operator's joystick and performers' voices; towering wall sections that flicker with shifting patterns of light and color; and a musical chandelier, operated by remote control, with which the [opera's](#) husband and wife engage in a novel form of connubial congress.

The high-tech production arrives in Chicago directly from the American Repertory Theater in Boston, where "Death and the Powers" had its U.S. premiere on March 18 with the same cast (including baritone James Maddalena in the leading role), conductor (Gil Rose) and stage director (COT veteran Diane Paulus).

"Death and the Powers" was premiered last September in Monte Carlo on commission from that principality's Association Futurum, a foundation whose aim is to promote futuristic art and science projects and that provided the major funding for the production.

That COT once more is throwing its muscle behind a new American opera is especially noteworthy at a time when Lyric Opera is doing nothing in this regard. The Machover work leads off a COT season stocked with connoisseur's items, including Marc-Antoine Charpentier's French Baroque masterpiece, "Medee," and "He/She," a staged double bill of Schumann and Janacek song cycles.

Brian Dickie, who will step down as general director at the end of COT's 2012 season, knew full well the season would be a tough sell when he planned it but believes it's essential to keep the city's alternative opera company on artistic message.

"Is it a risky season?," he says, drily. "I don't know. Putting on the umpteenth revival of 'Barber of Seville' also is a risk!"

In any case, Dickie trusts traditional operagoers as well as opera novices will be fascinated by "Death and the Powers," COT's latest foray into new opera since its Midwest premiere of John Adams' "The Flowering Tree" in 2008.

The COT chief caught the work's premiere in Monte Carlo and later in Boston and found both performances "very thrilling." Despite the complex electronics involved, he's confident everything will be functioning like clockwork as the operabots mingle with the human performers.

The libretto is by former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky, who wrote the story with Paulus's husband, playwright Randy Weiner. Its main character is Simon Powers, an aging businessman-inventor who decides to dodge his mortality by downloading the essence of his being into a computerized reality called The System. His books, walls and chandelier become a network other characters, including his wife, daughter and assistant, are drawn into.

If all this sounds a bit forbidding, Machover's often lyrical, singable music, flowing in and out of the electronic soundscape, is not. The 57-year-old composer, who created the 90-minute opera at the **MIT** Media Lab he co-founded in Boston, is an innovator whose operas have been performed throughout the world, while the "hyperinstruments" he created have put sophisticated, interactive musical tools in the hands of professional and amateur musicians.

"I never expected to do 'Death and the Powers,' " the composer says, "but, just like I sometimes make instruments, sometimes I have to build a surrounding structure to realize projects such as this opera. The Media Lab is an interesting place in which to make something really new and different like this happen."

Machover says he has gotten nibbles from cities as far-flung as **San Francisco**, Singapore, Istanbul and Bombay about taking up the production once it leaves Chicago.

Meanwhile, the composer waxes enthusiastic about the venue in which COT will power up his operabots.

"With this show," Machover says, "you really want the acoustic sound to be blended with the electric sound. In other words, you want a hall which sounds very good for both. The Harris Theater is, I think, ideal."

Chicago Opera Theater's production of "Death and the Powers" opens at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and runs for three more performances through April 10 at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph Drive. The company's spring season continues through May 8. \$40-\$120; 312-704-8414, [chicagooperatheater.org](http://chicagooperatheater.org).

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