

Concert Review: Chicago Opera Theater's *Death and the Powers* is magnificent

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Death and the Powers composed by Tod Machover is a futuristic opera that stretches the imagination with a powerful story that combines philosophy, religion, and love. The libretto was written by former U.S. Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky. The opera was developed by Machover's Opera of the Future Group at the MIT Media Lab. The sci-fi opera boldly and successfully melds the digital with the acoustic creating an operatic experience that must be experienced live to appreciate the aesthetics completely.

The opera is told through the "eyes" of robots preprogrammed to act out a human story exploring the meaning of death. Simon Powers, portrayed by James Maddalena, is a rich inventor that escapes death by "downloading" himself into his computerized environment before his body gives way. The transformation from human to computer mutates Simon's environment into a living collective of himself called The System. As the story unfolds, friends, family, and business associates are left behind. The story explains how The System impacts and changes Simon's relationships.

The cast is a group of phenomenal singers who do good job weaving melodies between the complex electro-acoustic orchestration. Emily Albrink is Evvy, Simon's wife. Sara Heaton is Miranda, Simon's daughter. Hal Cazalet plays Nicholas, Simon's assistant. Even the minor characters have stupendous voices.

When the opera first begins, the audience is left assuming that humanity no longer exists. The E.T.-looking robots spring to life gliding across to stage programmed to reenact a human story in order to comprehend the meaning of death. It is unclear whether the robots die after the reenactment, but the stupidity of robots creates moments of humor around the deep, philosophical storyline.

Once Simon becomes the The System, he perceives his new digital state as perfect. The System is divine and not to be bothered by humanity's trivialities, which elaborates on the meaning of "being human." On stage, The System is a combination of three digital towers blanketed by lights that change color reflecting Simon's state and influences the mood on stage.

Machover serves as digital conductor sitting in the audience using a customized iPad to modify and make subtle changes in the robotics, electronics and acoustics to perfect the live experience. The orchestral score effectively balances between electro blips and bleeps and traditional instrumentation.

At times, it's impossible to distinguish between the programmed and the performed. This is likely because the astounding singing by the cast. Asked to do some rather odd stage work, each vocalist displays amazing control and stamina while sliding across the floor or lying down flat or twisting in odd ways. Regardless of the acting demands, each vocalist didn't miss a beat, kept the character, and never lost the emotional connection with the music.

There were two scenes that struck me the most. The first was a scene when Evvy, Simon's wife, comes out from hiding after her husband has morphed into The System. In a rather eerie, yet moving moment, the chandelier drops down and becomes an extension of Simon. The couple reminisces over their first dance together. In a moment of erotic passion, Evvy calls out, "Touch me," and the chandelier grips her with Simon responding, "More." The tender moment is a reminder that Simon's new digital form, while able to host human memories, cannot substitute the human touch.

The second and most powerful scene is the ending when Evvy and Simon's assistant Nicholas have joined Simon in The System, but Miranda resists the transforming herself. This culminates into the most dramatic moment when Simon returns in human-like form and tries to compel his daughter to join him in the system. Miranda rebels against her father choosing to live her life as a human and die. The full combination of lighting, electro-acoustic music and singing creates a magnificent climax and powerful live moment. I was fully absorbed and my senses were grappled by the scene.

After an intense final scene, the epilogue returns to the robots and they are all still confused about death. And then the robots collectively shutdown as if there time has ended. Has the grim reaper visited the robots? The ambivalent ending raises questions, but also provides a sound resolution before the robotic lights shut down.

If you have the opportunity to experience *Death and the Powers*, then do so. You won't regret it. The contemporary opera is accessible, thought-provoking, and a 21st century masterpiece.