

DEATH AND THE POWERS

A NEW OPERA BY TOD MACHOVER

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Tod Machover's operas boast qualities that might seem contradictory — heavy reliance on technology and tremendous emotional impact. This season, *Death and the Powers* arrives at Dallas Opera.

mind and spirit into a computer system or cyberspace. Unlike any opera written before, the lead character essentially disappears after a few scenes, becoming a disembodied presence, whose voice and physicality are felt only as a presence registered by changes in the scenery.

The opera uses a small orchestra complemented by computers, a complex array of speakers and sophisticated electronics to tell a very basic story, but the technological ambition is high: Machover and Pinsky want the theater itself to be suffused with the personality and life force of the absent Simon Powers, as if he were psychically inhabiting the theatrical space.

It is ultimately a story of metamorphosis, one of the oldest themes in opera, with a classic pedigree dating back to Ovid and beyond. Yet the music and lyrics are restless, with a very contemporary anxiety about death, about what comes after life, and the effort it takes to live fully and completely in this world, despite its disappointments and sadness. "I have two daughters, and my parents are getting older," says Machover. "I was thinking partly about mortality, but also how the details of one's life are, or are not, passed from anybody to anybody else." He was thinking about the succession of generations, the transmission of memory and love, and wondering, "What gets lost?"

Pinsky has created a curious and memorable lead character, a wealthy, egocentric, ferociously forward-looking man who cites poetry with the cloying bravado of an autodidact. As he prepares to be subsumed into the "System," his speech is mixed with fragments of May Swenson; later, he quotes lyrics from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, set by Mahler in his Second Symphony, another journey of death and resurrection. Oscillating between the philosophical and the vulgar in a peculiarly American way, Powers cites Walt Whitman and Disney, the high and the low, the lyrical and the sentimental, then chortles, "And by the way, I have billions of bucks / And I can still sign checks."

"We always thought of somebody part Howard Hughes, part Walt Disney, part Bill Gates," says Machover. The moral ambiguity and slightly tarnished charisma of the main character color the entire opera, which is framed by a prologue and epilogue for four robots. These operabots set up the narrative as a flashback to the human era, the "Organic Age" of the "Human Creators." Questions of mortality and suffering are alien to them, but they enact the opera as a mandatory ritual, a kind of religious observance they don't quite understand.

That was Pinsky's idea, and it's telling that Machover wasn't quite sure, initially, what to do with it. For everything that is innovative about the score — its musical "chandelier" that chan-

Perhaps it is his longtime association with MIT's pioneering Media Lab, or the lingering impact of his first opera, *Valis*, which opened at Paris's Pompidou Center and redefined the parameters of music drama in 1987. Perhaps it's his training and teachers — Elliott Carter, Luigi Dallapiccola and Roger Sessions — a catholic roster of mid-century academic heavyweights.

Or it could be his invention of instruments such as the hypercello, which fuse acoustic and computer-processed sounds to give the performer new expressive power and polyphonic possibilities. When Yo-Yo Ma performed on one in 1991, one *New York Times* critic dubbed it "brilliantly annoying and fascinating" before dismissing the whole thing as a mere "escapade."

Or maybe it's the wild hair and geek chic, or the phalanx of brilliant students and collaborators who help him realize his high-tech musical projects around the globe. In any case, one expects something different from Tod Machover — something harder edged and more cerebral, obscure and emotionally insular — than what he has been producing lately.

But Machover, voluble and friendly in person, confounds expectations. *Valis*, based on a science-fiction novel by Philip K. Dick and dubbed "the first opera of the twenty-first century," now sounds anything but scary, and his last three operas, *Resurrection*, *Skellig* and *Death and the Powers*, have rare emotional depth. Machover, now a fully mature composer, is unafraid of harnessing the old-fashioned powers of opera, unafraid of sentimentality, unafraid of C Major.

His most recent opera, *Death and the Powers*, has been making its way around the opera world since its premiere in 2010, at L'Opéra de Monte-Carlo in Monaco. Since then, Diane Paulus's production of Machover's "robot opera" has been seen in Boston and Chicago, and it will be revived at Dallas Opera in February 2014. The libretto, with lyrics by Robert Pinsky and a story by Pinsky and playwright Randy Weiner, follows the Powers family as its patriarch, Simon, seeks to elude death by uploading his



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nels the touch of the singers, its robot choreography, its real-time interplay of live and processed sound — the back story and the basic form of the work are remarkably traditional. And that extends to the traditionally fraught relationship between words and music, poet and composer. Machover is quick to say that he admires Pinsky, and that once the libretto was finished, the former Poet Laureate was a ready and willing collaborator. But the genesis of the libretto was one of “the hardest things” Machover says he’s ever been through. The result, a libretto that is tight, fast-paced, singable and filled with alliteration, internal rhyme and a distinctive but quirky sense of meter, was worth the struggle. “He wanted to call it ‘A Robot’s Pageant,’” Machover says of his collaborator. “I resisted all that.” It seemed too coy, or perhaps playful, or distancing. Machover isn’t interested in the arch aesthetic — the chilly, wry, arms-length emotions of postmodern art.

“I am not an ironist,” he says. “In some ways....” He stops. “Of all the pieces I’ve done....” He stops again, then mentions the reaction to his lush and lyrical opera *Resurrection*, based on Tolstoy’s morally lacerating last novel and given its premiere almost fifteen years ago at Houston Grand Opera. “They were like, ‘Tod is a maverick, why did he write this crazy opera, with all this direct emotion?’”

Resurrection was indeed a surprise. In *Opera*, Andrew Porter admitted to being moved by it but called it an “endeavor to reach and stir a ‘conventional’ opera audience.” He noted its “Richard Rodgersy” appeal and its “compromising” aesthetic. It was, as Machover says, his most purely operatic work, in its structure, its vocal setting and its orchestration. The composer immersed himself in the operas of Tchaikovsky, the early works of Stravinsky and the music of Scriabin and Shostakovich for inspiration. *Resurrection’s* opening churns with a reference to Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, a musical clue to its emotional ambition. It is built up from discrete arias and choruses, it features exuberant peasants who sing a May Dance with rustic inflections, and it pleads passionately for a novel that readers often find claustrophobic.

Technology pervades *Resurrection*, adding richness and color and sometimes a terrible ferocity to some of its more brutal scenes. But it is fully integrated into the score, a complement to the basic orchestral forces and a ready helpmeet to the extreme emotional demands of the story. Often it is all but undetectable. The music, the characterization and the drama leave the impression of a Romantic opera on steroids, heightened in affect but entirely within the realm of opera as it has been understood and enjoyed for the past two centuries.

In 2008, Machover was back with *Skellig*, based on a popular children’s novel by British author David Almond (who also wrote the libretto). Like *Death and the Powers*, it too is a metamorphosis story, but it lives in a simpler, utopian emotional world. Two children approach and show kindness to a degraded being, Skellig, who is part animal, part angel, and thus a philosophically fraught metaphor for the human condition. Skellig is transformed, from brute to savior, and the opera ends on a joyful note.

These most recent works seem to flow into one another, the outsized emotionality and fundamental questions (about decency and responsibility) of *Resurrection* leading to the more Brittenesque, chamber-sized and innocent sentiments of *Skellig*. And in

Skellig there are the rudiments of the intellectual challenge that Machover confronts in *Death and the Powers*. In the earlier work, a young man seems to summon the physical world out of darkness and nothingness, in a mix of spoken text and shreds of lyrical inspiration, and the world he summons — a broken-down house and ramshackle garage — begins to “creak and groan” with an alarmingly anthropomorphic power.

That prefigures the System, the ubiquitous but invisible presence into which Simon Powers passes in *Death and the Powers*. John Cage, and his sense that the world itself is a kind of music — that listening can connect us to something deeper than the notes on the page or sounds of an instrument — is lurking somewhere in the background. And Machover describes his ongoing musical project as an effort to connect that encompassing, all-and-everything sense of the world as music into music made with traditional means, into opera, into the opera house and its time-tested tools for making dramas live onstage.

But it’s also tempting to psychoanalyze the composer for a moment: his mother was a pianist, his father a computer scientist, and his work repeatedly enacts a tension between traditional and technological means of music-making. *Death and the Powers* ends with Simon’s daughter, Miranda, forced to decide whether to join her father in the immortality of the System or remain a corporeal and mortal woman on a planet filled with miseries. At some level, the opera dramatizes the question central to the composer’s career: can technology come fully alive; can it be more than a substitute; is it capable of feeling, touching, caressing the emotions?

“One of the things I admire is that the technology never takes over the story,” says Keith Cerny, general director of Dallas Opera. Unlike other experimental works, in which technology is deployed ostentatiously, with Machover it never gets in the way, threatening “the audience’s connection” with the drama, he says.

In the case of *Death and the Powers*, that’s because technology is both the means and, in a fundamental sense, the subject of the opera. It is a dream, an ambition, a hope, a promise of immortality. After sending Simon triumphantly into the immortality of the System, Machover stands back and registers all the ambiguity and disappointment of what that might mean. In the end, Miranda chooses not to follow her father. Like her Shakespearean predecessor, Miranda from *The Tempest*, she both loves her father and is slightly horrified at what he has become.

That tension, the beauty of the music and the strange arc that Machover has been following of late leave one wondering if he is like Prospero, Miranda’s father. And if he will one day find himself abjuring labels such as “America’s most wired composer,” it is unlikely that he will abandon the electronic wizardry on which he has built his career. One imagines that it will somehow disappear entirely into the traditional fabric of opera, a reverse process from the trajectory of Simon Powers, but one that will allow him to say, “Now my charms are all o’erthrown / and what strength I have’s mine own.” □



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