

# DEATH AND THE POWERS

A NEW OPERA BY TOD MACHOVER

## Opera

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### Opera on screen

#### Death and the Powers

*Live simulcast from Dallas Opera to the Royal Academy of Music, February 16*

Tod Machover promised a live screening with a difference for his *Death and the Powers* from Dallas Opera. Described as 'the first-ever global interactive simulcast', the screening was supplemented with a rich array of hi-tech extras, all devised by Machover and his Opera of the Future team at the MIT Media Lab. Prior to the event, the audience had been directed to download a 'Powers Live' app to their mobile devices, and throughout the opera, phones and tablets lit up around the auditorium, encouraging their owners to get involved, even to the point of influencing the action on the Dallas stage.

*Death and the Powers* was premiered in Monte-Carlo in 2010, when Andrew Porter found much to praise (January 2011, pp. 54-5). Diane Paulus's production has since toured to Boston, Chicago and now Dallas. Of the principal singers, only one has been replaced since the premiere, Robert Orth taking over the title role. Conducted here by Nicole Paiement, Machover's music, while often abrasive, is well suited to operatic drama. A hard-edged minimalism forms its basis, but its distinctive character comes more from the sonorities of his computer-generated sounds than from harmonic or contrapuntal concerns. The libretto, by Robert Pinsky, is fast-paced and well structured, addressing traditional operatic subjects—morality, mortality, the corrupting influence of wealth—through an ambitious futuristic scenario that affords Machover many opportunities to integrate his technological ideas. The framing narrative is the libretto's only weakness—a group of robots from further in the future acting out the drama in commemoration of their long-deceased human creators. The robots are unconvincing, and these scenes add little.

The opera lends itself to cinema relay. The story concerns a rich tycoon, Simon Powers, who 'uploads' his consciousness into a computer matrix, called 'The System'. Powers spends most of the opera offstage, his voice amplified and manipulated to represent his disembodied state. The System is evoked through electronic sounds, and both they and Orth's manipulated voice came across well in the live relay. The staging makes extensive use of computer-generated imagery, and this too was well conveyed to the cinema.

Though inert for the first few minutes, the app came to life as the opera progressed, with colours and shapes gradually appearing. These abstract patterns were interspersed

with a series of 'interactive moments'. The onstage projections representing the System were often duplicated on the app, and would ripple to the touch. The novelty soon wore off, though, leaving the uneasy feeling that the two screens, large and small, were competing for our attention, the app often losing out. In the fourth scene, for example, a sensuous erotic encounter takes place between Simon's wife, Evvy (Patricia Risley), and a musical chandelier representing his new virtual form. The app proposed some interactivity here, again involving touch-responsive patterns, but nobody seemed very interested; all eyes were fixed on Risley.



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The app was occasionally employed as a supplementary screen, usually to good effect. In the sixth scene, a governmental delegation arrives, and in a *Wizard-of-Oz*-like encounter they attempt to converse with a giant but vague projection of Powers's face. Here the app allowed us to look inside the System, to see Powers mutely dismissing their pleas, but the separation between large screen and small ensured that the distance between them was retained: an effective narrative device.

Yet true interaction remained at a premium, and while the app added interest, it did little to increase the sense of participation. At one point, shaking our phones apparently influenced the lighting effects on the Dallas stage, but it was difficult to see how. There was one nice touch, though, that effectively brought the audience into the story. When downloading the app, we had been invited to include our Facebook profile. At the end of the opera, the robots instigate a 'human upload' into the System. The final image on the app was of the audience members, all ascending into the mainframe.

Even without the interactive element, *Death and the Powers* is an impressively hi-tech opera. The addition of handheld devices could risk fetishizing the technology, but in an opera about the interface between man and machine it seemed wholly appropriate. Machover and his creative team invite us to think differently about opera broadcasting. Until now, the cinema has been simply a substitute for the opera house. The interactivity presented here, while admittedly experimental, promises more: the simulcast as a unique and enhanced experience. It is unlikely to transform the wider opera broadcast scene, but it clearly has huge potential for the technologically-engaged operatic culture that Machover continues to pioneer.



■ Patricia Risley, Robert Orth and Joelle Harvey in '*Death and the Powers*'

GAVIN DIXON