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COT's dazzling 'robot opera' poses provocative new questions 'Death and the Powers' at its heart is about family connections

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Our wondrous technology could conceivably evolve to the point that it will enable us to shed this mortal coil and achieve a kind of digital immortality. But is living beyond the corporeal world really worth it if we've left our souls, our humanity, indeed other people, behind?

That's just one of several moral and philosophical questions that surface in Tod Machover's absorbing and thought-provoking sci-fi fantasy opera, "Death and the Powers, the Robots' Opera," which had its Midwest premiere Saturday night at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance to launch Chicago Opera Theater's spring festival season.

This is a show unlike anything you have ever seen or heard before. "Death and the Powers" is a cautionary tale about the romance and mystery of technology that enlists some of the most complex, sophisticated technology to have been put on the operatic stage. But, for all its computer-generated theatrical dazzle – created by Machover's Opera of the Future group at the MIT Media Lab -- it is at heart a poignant family drama, about how we connect, and how the choices we make in life impact on those we care about and who care about us.

The first music we hear is electronic chiming emanating from 143 speakers arranged around the theater, after which the darkened stage is invaded by "operabots." These 11 rather endearing mechanical creatures, operated by offstage technicians, sport triangular heads atop plastic tubing and glide around the stage while interacting with the singers. It's the distant future,

mankind has disappeared and the robots have been charged with enacting "an ordained ritual" so as to learn more about the vanished beings that created them.

Simon Powers, a Trump-like billionaire businessman and self-styled "tinkerer" who's approaching death, uses his vast resources to perpetuate his life by downloading his essence – thoughts, feelings, memories -- into a digital world called "The System" in the libretto by former U.S. poet laureate Robert Pinsky, based on a story by Pinsky and Randy Weiner.

"See you later!," Simon exclaims before entering his new, post-organic state. For most of the opera the unseen Powers communicates in electronically altered tones to his wife, daughter and assistant represented by patterns of light that play across the towering walls of Alex McDowell's futuristic set.

Powers, sung with wondrous sensitivity to words and music by the firm-voiced baritone James Maddalena, exults in his newfound liberation from what he derisively calls "the world of meat." He wants wife Evvy, daughter Miranda and assistant Nicholas to join him in his digital Shangri-La. "It's never the matter that matters," he tells them. "What matters is More." But Simon can exert God-like omnipotence from his realm beyond the body, and this has somehow resulted in worldwide war and famine. A delegation from the United Nations, United Way and "The Administration" is dispatched to reason with him, to no avail.

Eventually every family member but one crosses over into "the light." Miranda (note the reference to Shakespeare's "The Tempest") is the lone hold-out. "Who will we touch?," she plaintively asks her father, in the riveting duet that's one of the highlights of Machover's richly inventive score. "Alive!," she declares at the end, ruefully embracing "this body of death," imperfect though it is.

The set designs take on a sensate intelligence of their own that makes them as "real" as any character in the drama. Three huge walls, a stylized representation of Simon's library, shift in and out of place, their pulsing grids of hot colors controlled by computer programs linked to the singers' real-time sounds and movements. There's also a singing chandelier, vaguely resembling a large winged pelvis, whose wings curl in and out. On its strings Evvy (soprano Emily Albrink, singing beautifully) strums a duet of erotic

reunion with her husband. The custom sound system has to be heard to be believed.

That all this trailblazing technology, developed over several years at the MIT Media Lab, doesn't vitiate the emotional pull of the story, and in fact enhances it, speaks as much for the strength of Machover's music as it does for the skill of the performers. The entire cast took part in the U.S. premiere last month in Boston, where it was presented under the auspices of director Diane Paulus' American Repertory Theater. The world premiere took place in September in Monte Carlo.

Machover composes as masterfully for singers as he does for actual, electronic and newly invented instruments. His tonally grounded music flickers, hums, pulses, thunders and soars from the expert, 15-piece Boston Modern Orchestra Project under Gil Rose's firm and trenchant baton. You cannot tell where the live music leaves off and where the live synthesized sounds begin, which of course is Machover's objective.

The production looks and sounds extremely well settled-in following its run in Boston. Maddalena, fresh from re-creating his "original cast" performance of Richard Nixon in John Adams' "Nixon in China" at the Metropolitan Opera, is superb. So is Sara Heaton, with her sweet, pure soprano, in the pivotal role of the skeptical Miranda. She is very affecting in the plaintive aria where Simon's daughter laments no longer having "a father of flesh and blood." Hal Cazalet uses an athletic body and agile tenor to fine effect as the assistant Nicholas. Paulus' staging and Karole Armitage's choreography drive the 90-minute, intermission-less show with fluid urgency.

The singers, chorus and extras were joined by the composer, conductor, director and other members of the wizardly production team for a long and grateful ovation on opening night. "Death and the Powers" is a must-see for anybody who cares about the exciting new techno-driven directions music theater is taking in the early 21st century.

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