Simon Powers was a great man, a legend who wanted to go beyond the bounds of humanity. He was a successful inventor, businessman, and showman. During his life, he accumulated unimaginable wealth and power. He is the founder of the System, a human organism material experiment which investigated the transduction of human existence into other forms. His work was heralded as revolutionary and genius, but his ideas and experiments also had implications that mainstream society found objectionable. He has received thousands of hate letters. To many, he is considered a pariah. Reaching the end of his life, Powers faces the question of his legacy: “When I die, what remains? What will I leave behind? What can I control? What can I perpetuate?” He is now conducting the last experiment of his life. He is in the process of passing from one form of existence to another in an effort to project himself into the future. Whether or not he is actually alive is a question. Simon Powers is himself now a System. Powers must rely on his family to complete the experiment. The strains on the family come to a head, as Evvy, his third wife, withdraws more and more from the real world in a desire to join Simon in the System. Miranda Powers, Simon’s young daughter by his first wife, is fearful of losing touch with the real world, and tries desperately to keep her father connected to the suffering of others in the world. The family also includes Nicholas, who is Simon’s protégé, the son he never had. Nicholas is the ultimate product of Simon’s manipulation. Nicholas holds the knowledge on how to project Simon to the future. Like a puppet and somehow incomplete himself, he is devoted to completing Simon’s final experiment. Simon’s transition into the System creates global havoc prompting a visit by representatives from the United Way, The United Nations, and The Administration, as well as a parade of the world’s miseries—the victims of famine, torture, crime, and disease. This story is framed by a quartet of “rolling, lurching, and gliding” robots who have been commanded in some future time to perform this pageant, and who—in a Prologue and Epilogue—attempt to understand the meaning of death.

Death and the Powers will be a highly innovative and unusual opera, groundbreaking in musical language and materials, scenographic technique, and performance technology. It will be a one-act, full evening work scored for a small ensemble of specially designed Hyperinstruments, and will include a robotic, animatronic stage—the first of its kind—that will gradually “come alive” as a main character in the drama. The opera will have broad appeal, compelling to opera lovers as well as to young, adventurous audiences, and will be adaptable to presentation in a very wide range of performance venues.
Music and Instrumentation

The music of Death and the Powers will represent a bold step forward towards a new kind of opera. Innovative vocal techniques will be designed especially for this work, especially for Simon who will virtuosically control extensions and manipulations of his own voice the way DJ’s spin turntables. Miranda (asoprano), Evvy (mezzo soprano), and Nicholas (tenor) will sing in traditional fashion on stage, sometimes amplified, sometimes not. Simon (bass-baritone, with an unusually extended range and exceptional acting ability) will always be on stage, and will communicate directly as well as through The System. His “interludes” allow the audience to glimpse Simon’s changing inner state, and provide dramatic musical propulsion and musical continuity for the whole opera. The vocal music will range from the lyrical, expressive singing of members of the Powers family, to the robotic bird that vocalizes during key moments of the opera, to the “voice” of Simon Powers – careening between speech and song, memory and immediacy, breath and bravura – that is at once expiring and transcendent. The instrumentation for the opera calls for a small ensemble (ca.10 players: 5 strings, 3 winds, 1 percussion, 1 keyboard) located in the pit. Players will perform on specially designed, next-generation Hyperinstruments which will represent significant advances over our current ones, in gestural sophistication, beauty of sound, and simplicity of use. Unlike current electronic instruments, these new Hyperinstruments will allow each performer to control his/her precise sound mix and balance, with overall balance of instruments and voices being modulated by the conductor. Another innovative musical feature of the opera will be the first-ever use of sonic animatronics (“sonitronics”), or physical, sculptural elements, such as a robotic “Chandelier” which is both a beautiful, compelling object as well as a subtle, resonant musical instrument whose string-like surfaces are struck, bowed, tickled and stretched by skilled Hyperinstrumentalists.

The range of expressivity will be wide, from the numerous fragments interjected and juxtaposed by The System, to the contrasting styles of each family member, to the tone color portraits articulated by the Hyperinstrument ensemble, to the simple melodies of a robotic bird. Although much of the music of the opera will be “electrified,” special sound projection techniques will be used so that everything will have a lovely, shapely, three-dimensional quality, capable both of filling the entire theater with viscous, enveloping waves and also of whispering ever-so-delicately into the ear of every audience member.

Scenography and Production

The production of Death and the Powers will be at once spectacularly innovative and practically simple. The stage will represent Simon Powers’ house, but this room will gradually reveal itself to be a vast, interconnected, intelligent structure – Simon has turned himself into the room, or vice versa. To accomplish this effect, we will design and build a completely new, modular structure that will allow the room itself to change its shape, undulating, vibrating, pulsating, or pounding. This “robotic architecture” is being designed by Cynthia Breazeal and her team at the MIT Media Lab and production designer Alex McDowell (Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The Terminal) who will bring his considerable experience in film design and animatronics to the stage for the first time. The physical environment will consist of a vast array of interlocking forms – derived from loudspeaker-driver technology – that are independently controlled by motors and hydraulics. The System is rapid, lightweight and silent, and can be programmed to create sculptural images, moving patterns, and even human-like gestures and expressions. Embedded in The System will be a number of image display surfaces and sound-producing elements, capable of showing the disparate, fleeting thoughts and memories from Simon’s inner world. Also essential to the production of Death and the Powers is an overall technical design that will allow the opera to be installed, rehearsed and performed in extremely diverse performance spaces – from theaters to black boxes to opera houses to galleries to even more unusual venues – with a minimum of logistics or expense. To achieve this, we will build and acquire special hardware components, employ newly designed interactive performance control software created at the MIT Media Lab (by Joshua Strickon in Tod Machover’s group), and try to achieve as close to a completely “wireless” production as possible. Just as Machover’s Valis and Brain Opera completely changed the nature of live, interactive musical performance, we believe that Death and the Powers will launch a new era of opera production, allowing for scenic richness and spectacle, while being lightweight and eminently touring, and therefore viewable by the widest possible audience.

Schedule

Death and the Powers will be developed and produced at the MIT Media Lab through Summer 2008. It will receive its World Premiere performances in Monte-Carlo – under the patronage of Prince Albert of Monaco – in November 2008 and then will tour worldwide. For further information, contact Tod Machover at tod@media.mit.edu.