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MUSIC

## MUSIC; An Opera Lures a Futurist Back to the Present

By KYLE GANN

"RESURRECTION," the new work being given its premiere on Friday by the Houston Grand Opera, centers on a 19th-century Russian nobleman and the peasant girl he seduced and abandoned. The Prince is a baritone, the peasant girl a mezzo-soprano. The staging includes a courtroom scene, a party in a magnificent Moscow palace, a death march in plodding C minor in a desolate Siberian prison camp. The libretto is woven from Tolstoy's final novel, a story echoing the classic Wagnerian theme of redemption through love, culminating in a stirring prison-scene climax. There is nothing odd about any of this. And that is precisely what is so odd about it.

Because the composer is Tod Machover, who, perhaps more than anyone else, is identified with new computer-music possibilities, science-fiction opera, artificial intelligence manifested in sound. He is known for his 1988 opera, "Valis," arguably the most famous achievement in operatic science fiction, which traces the story of a Philip K. Dick novel with rock beats and hallucinogenic synthesizer riffs. He is known for his "hyperinstruments," like the computerized cello on which Yo-Yo Ma performed, each movement of his arm triggering great washes of sound rising through stacks of loudspeakers.

Mr. Machover is also known for his interactive "Brain Opera," which drew thousands of audience members to Lincoln Center in 1996 to speak into microphones, push pedals and buttons, and listen through headphones to a complex artificial-intelligence music system patterned after the work of the computer maven Marvin Minsky. In the end, the venture was widely perceived as a failure.

And now, at 45, Mr. Machover is returning to his Russian-immigrant roots to write a 19th-century operatic love story with a bad-guy baritone and a good-guy tenor. What gives? Is the "Resurrection" he is looking for his own?

Not to hear him tell it. Like many artists, he sees the unity underlying an output that seems crazily diverse from the outside. Sitting recently in his lovely home in Belmont, Mass., which was built and decorated mostly in wood by an M.I.T. professor who predated Mr. Machover's current tenure there, he explained "Valis" as a seminal work that branched off in two directions, one toward "Brain Opera," the other toward "Resurrection." "Valis" was an extraterrestrial acronym for Vast Active Living Intelligent System, and the intelligent-machine aspects of the work continued in "Brain Opera." For Mr. Machover, "Resurrection" picks up the personal-development thread of "Valis."

"'Valis,' was about certain individuals' spiritual or personal journeys, their psychological development," Mr. Machover mused. "'Valis' always stayed inside its main character's head. After that, I wanted to write something about how you decide what your relationship is to the outside world. You can't wait until some

hypothetical point when you're ready to start making a difference to other people. What can you actually do? At what level do you help other people or society as a whole?"

So Mr. Machover spent his post-"Valis" decade searching for a libretto to explore that theme, rejecting several nascent projects. One idea that sounds particularly intriguing was a work (with Peter Sellars as collaborator) about a family present at and later obsessed with the assassination of President Kennedy.

Instead, Mr. Machover returned to a book he had long loved, Tolstoy's "Resurrection." It tells the story of Prince Dmitry Nekhlyudov, who sits in a trial jury and recognizes the accused, the prostitute Katerina Maslova, as a young woman he seduced, impregnated and abandoned 10 years before, now mired in a sordid life. Unjustly sentenced to hard labor, Katerina is sent to prison. Nekhlyudov, racked with guilt, can no longer continue his carefree high-society life but must seek out Katerina and rescue her. At first she clings to her degraded state and repulses him, but Nekhlyudov obtains a pardon for her, and they are both resurrected in spirit. She agrees to marry not the Prince but a noble fellow prisoner named Simonson, and sends Nekhlyudov off to help transform the unjust world he now sees clearly.

"I've always been thirsty for knowledge, and at the same time interested in the question of when you have enough knowledge and should act on it," Mr. Machover said. "With this whole opera project I've been trying to move from self-reflection to not only action but something that would benefit the world. I've always been looking for a story that would be motivational. That's a dreadful word. But something that would make the point that it is possible to do something, even though it may not be that big and you can't change everything at once. The opera ends with Nekhlyudov singing, 'I will take the first step.' He just gets to the point of realizing that he can do something and is ready to start."

Aside from this far from obvious thematic link between Philip K. Dick and Tolstoy, Mr. Machover points out that "Resurrection" also uses electronics. The work is billed as being scored for "electronically enhanced orchestra," though neither the director, Braham Murray, nor the conductor, Patrick Summers, seemed, before electronic rehearsals began, to know what that meant.

The idea came from David Gockley, the general director of the Houston Grand Opera. When Mr. Machover made a synthesized cassette of the work, it included "some wonderful electronic sounds that could never be reproduced by traditional orchestra," Mr. Gockley said. "I found them so effective that I encouraged him to include them in the final orchestration."

In the score, which is nearly four inches thick in small print (although the opera runs a relatively modest two and a half hours), it is clear that there are three electronic keyboards in the orchestra. Two of them spend Act I mostly doubling various orchestral lines. But in Act II, where the scene changes from Moscow to the bleak vastness of Siberia, the entire sound world is transformed, and the two synthesizers become more independent. The third keyboard, meanwhile, sends digital information to the other two, changing their timbres, sometimes rapidly, and somehow interacting with a computer as the story progresses.

It is unclear how prominent the electronics will be in the overall sound, but Mr. Machover, who trained in Paris at Ircam, Pierre Boulez's mecca of high technology, and who teaches in the electronic studio at M.I.T., has a long history of blending electronic tones and live acoustic instruments in a smooth fusion, going back to his "Spectres Parisiens" of 1984.

Mr. Machover seems to regret slightly that his reputation has been so swamped by the image of a wildly

futuristic electronic scientist.

"The common goal of most of my music is a musical goal or expressive goal," he said. "The means I choose usually seem like just the right ones for the project. I love large instrumental forces. I love real voices. After 'Valis,' I wanted to find something that wasn't just an electric sound. There are wonderful things about electric sound, and there are a lot of things about electric sound that I'm dissatisfied with. The flatness of it. I don't like the fact that electric sounds have to get very loud to hit you in the gut. Acoustic sound, if you do it right, or blend it the right way with electronics, is much more three-dimensional, and there's more dynamic range."

The fact that Mr. Gockley first approached him about writing a conventional orchestral opera 10 years ago defuses speculation that Mr. Machover returned to the orchestra in retreat from the partial failure of "Brain Opera," which received enviable millions in corporate sponsorship without stirring much critical praise. He admits that "Brain Opera" was "more ambitious than what we had the means to do at the time," but claims that it improved as it toured Europe, Brazil and Japan.

"It certainly wasn't perfectly realized at Lincoln Center," he said. "The main thing I wasn't satisfied with was the extent to which we could meaningfully integrate audience input into the finished piece. We got better at that over a couple of years." Still, the work will soon find a final destination as a permanent installation in Vienna.

Mr. Machover studied with two of the most famous icons of intellectual complexity in American music, Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter, and the complexity of the "Resurrection" score has received much comment. Yet the music is mostly tonal, often in fairly static F major or C minor for long stretches. The more complex aspect is the extremely fluid rhythm, for the meters change almost constantly, and quintuplets are found among already mind-bendingly difficult meters like 11/16 and 13/16. Whether or not the score represents a peculiarly Machoverian sound world, the combination of tonal harmony and mercurial rhythm has been a Machover trademark ever since his 1984 ensemble piece "Nature's Breath."

"People have asked me, 'Is this a dissonant score?' " said Mr. Summers, who will conduct the Houston performances. "It's actually more complicated than that. It is often dissonant and as often quite wonderfully consonant, covering a wide range of emotions very graphically. I would call the score Straussian, in an emotional sense. In an orchestrational sense, it puts one in mind of Janacek, yet there are lyrical passages that remind one of Mozart. It is polyrhythmic, polytonal, polytimbred, if that's a word."

Is it a difficult work for the singers? "Yeah," Mr. Summers said with a sigh. "Singers don't often deal with such complex rhythms. Such immense panic set in when we started. But there's no difficulty for them now, and the next modern score they tackle won't seem difficult."

Mr. Gockley, who is responsible for the two dozen premieres the fertile Houston Grand Opera has produced in the last quarter-century, including Meredith Monk's "Atlas" and John Adams's "Nixon in China," was attracted to Mr. Machover by his grateful use of the voice in "Valis." Yet after the psychedelic "Valis" and the aborted J.F.K. opera, the 19th-century story of "Resurrection" struck Mr. Gockley as a complete surprise.

"If anyone had told me two years ago that we would soon do an opera based on Tolstoy, I would probably

have just giggled," he said. "We are infamous for having created the 'docu-opera' movement," he added, citing "Nixon in China," Michael Daugherty's "Jackie O," and Stewart Wallace's "Harvey Milk." "We were heading that way with Tod until he latched onto Mr. Tolstoy. For many people that genre has run its course, and the way now is to look at metaphorical subjects from other periods and not try to be so hip."

REGARDLESS of whether "Resurrection" indeed becomes the first work in a major new trend, the Russian subject matter had a strong ancestral resonance for Mr. Machover, the grandson of four Russian Jewish immigrants who all came to the United States within a few years after Tolstoy wrote "Resurrection" in 1899. Thus the paradox of this futuristic musical thinker's being drawn back to an Old World subject so relevant to the past his family left behind.

Is there an analogy between Prince Nekhlyudov's leaving his society life to reform the world and Mr. Machover's breaking away from the hermetic world of contemporary music to try to reach a broader public? Mr. Machover pointedly avoids any such suggestion.

"First of all, I think of that as something you think about when you're a young composer and trying to find your voice," he said. "At this point, I feel like I've written pieces that I thought were reaching out and nobody understood. I find it hard to predict. I think this piece is one that people should like and respond to, but who the hell knows?"

The next theater work he has planned will tackle the conflict between communicative compromise and artistic integrity directly: it is an opera about the years Arnold Schoenberg spent in Los Angeles, and includes George Gershwin and the Marx Brothers (with whom Schoenberg played tennis) as characters.

Is this yet another stretch into new territory? "One answer is, my musical interests and my imagination go in a bunch of different directions," Mr. Machover said. "I always dreamed of a musical language in which all of the strands I'm interested in would come together. I am attracted to projects that bring more of what I love into this synthesis, into this mix. You don't pick the way your life or your creative work is going to go."

Photos: Joyce DiDonato and Scott Hendricks, at left, rehearse Tod Machover's "Resurrection." Above, an artist's rendering of a scene from the opera (George Hixson/Houston Grand Opera)(pg. 29). Patrick Summers, the music director of the Houston Grand Opera, conducts a rehearsal of "Resurrection." The music, he says, includes elements that remind him of Strauss and Janacek. (George Hixson/Houston Grand Opera)(pg. 32)