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A moment from *The Technophobe and the Madman* (photo: Hiroyuki Ito)

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Didkovsky, Rolnick, and Rowe Explode Opera Into Multiple Locations

A Tale of Two Cities

by Kyle Gann

Seattle composer Janice Giteck has written about ritual as the essence of a musical performance, ritual defined as "people coming together (gathering), the intended activity (performing), and the going away (leaving/dispersing)." She continues: "This format may be completely obvious, but . . . the ritual frame has not lost its charge. . . . It is, quite innocently, a function of our being human, something we need to do." Oddly enough, Internet composers seem determined to explode this ancient frame, making it possible to have performances without people gathering together. So today we have pianos in New York played via MIDI cable by pianists in San Diego, cross-continental improvisation groups that watch each other on digital screens. And now, thanks to composers Nick Didkovsky, Neil Rolnick, and Robert Rowe, we have an opera that took place in two cities at once, titled—with some irony—*The Technophobe and the Madman*.

What happened was, at NYU's Lowe Theater on February 20, Tyrone Henderson sang the part of the Madman, Kathleen Supove played piano, and Drew Waters played bass. A hundred and 60 miles away in Troy, New York, at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Maya Azucena sang the role of the Technophobe, Dean Sharp played drums, and Rolnick plied the electronic keyboards. Didkovsky and Rowe worked away at computers, blurring the instrumentalists' efforts into washes of sound; Rowe was with us, so I suppose Didkovsky was at Troy. We at NYU saw Henderson in person and Azucena on a huge screen; one presumes that the Troy audience saw just the opposite.

Rolnick has taken a battering ram up against the outer limits of electronic opera before; a work I remember from several years ago used computers to recreate the music and libretto anew with each performance, and the performers had to be on the *qui vive*, reading the music and lyrics from screens, never sure what would be required of them next. That was a little slice of chaos, compared to which *The Technophobe and the Madman* moved decades ahead in smoothness

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and musical cohesion. "Do you hear voices?" asked the Madman, beginning an ominous self-interrogation. "Do you believe that you have powers that others do not?"

"Yes, my powers are mine." Magisterially theatrical, he seemed sane enough, just homeless and justifiably paranoid: "I'm running wild in a jackknife society," he sang.

Interwoven with his story was the Technophobe's, she who was pursuing an Internet friend of her own creation. "Computers," she warned, "were made to deliver the military goods. Can we trust them?" The very terminology of computers is soaked with death: *abort transaction, fatal command*.

What did the Madman and the Technophobe have to do with each other? We never quite found out, and the opera ended suddenly after only 40 minutes, just as things seemed like they might be beginning to develop. Although the protagonists spoke their stories by turns, the finest passages were those in which they improvised singing together, Azucena and Henderson drawing soulful arabesques around each other's melodies. Meanwhile, Supove banged away at athletic synthesizer clusters, Waters plunked out ostinatos in odd meters, and the computers smeared their efforts into orchestral washes of sound, tonal continua with foreboding atmospheres, out of which would erupt prickly thickets of noise. Considering how many cooks were stirring the broth, the music achieved a remarkably focused fusion. And when, near the end, the camera at Troy moved back from Azucena's face to reveal the whole of our sister stage, it was an almost breathtaking realization of the geographic context we inhabited.

Overall, *The Technophobe and the Madman* gave the impression that the story had been created to fit the technology, not that the creators were inspired by an idea for an opera that made the technological situation necessary. One fears that if the creators could have gotten three cities involved, the title would have become *The Technophobe, the Madman, and the Attention-Deficit Disordered*. Still, failure to be terribly moving, memorable, or meaningful didn't prevent the work from being entertaining, as well as an impressively effortless-seeming feat of elaborate technology. One thinks of the 1876 world premiere of Wagner's *Ring*, which was the first European opera reviewed the next day in American papers via transatlantic cable. Perhaps future operas will not only be reviewed transcontinentally, but performed that way as well.

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