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Translating the Music of Trees Into the Sounds of Opera

The tech-forward composer Tod Machover has made a chamber opera of Richard Powers's novel "The Overstory," featuring Joyce DiDonato.

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The composer Tod Machover and this soprano Joyce DiDonato. Machover's chamber opera, "Overstory Overture," stars DiDonato and is an adaptation of Richard Powers's novel. Alex Hodor-Lee for The New York Times

By Thomas May
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5 MIN READ

Musical themes abound in the work of the novelist Richard Powers, often intertwined with science and social issues. The parallel decoding of Bach and DNA (“The Goldbug Variations”), the saga of an interracial family of classical performers unfolding against the events of the Civil Rights era (“The Time of Our Singing”): A signature of Powers’s novels is the virtuosity with which he weaves these strands into narratives that seem both surprising and inevitable.

With his 12th novel, [“The Overstory,”](#) which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2019, Powers draws on the findings of dendrology (the study of trees) and contemporary environmental anxieties to hint at a music that is always present but largely unrecognized — that of nature itself, as represented by the lives of trees.

Powers said in an interview that his “preoccupation with the more-than-human world, the living world beyond the human” had pushed his work in a new direction for “The Overstory,” which he called “the most operatic of my novels.” It is told on a large scale, with an extended cast of characters, wide geographical scope and a long time frame.

The composer Tod Machover sensed this operatic potential as soon as he read it and was especially drawn to its relevance. “The subjects Powers brings together here are so important,” Machover said in a phone interview from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Media Lab, where he directs the Opera of the Future group. “I’ve always wanted to write a theatrical work with many strands that come together in an unusual way.”

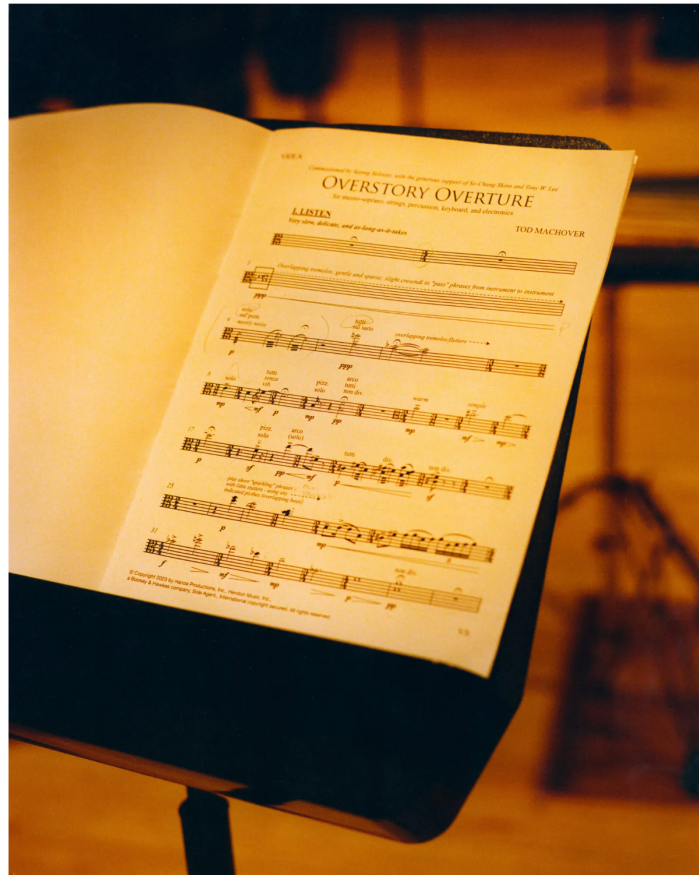
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Machover's first pass at the material, "Overstory Overture," a brief chamber opera featuring Joyce DiDonato, premieres on Tuesday at Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. The work, which was conceived both as a prelude to a full-scale opera and as a stand-alone piece, was commissioned by the string orchestra Sejong Soloists — their largest contemporary commission to date — and will be performed under the young conductor Earl Lee.



Machover's score. Alex Hodor-Lee for The New York Times

Machover — a composer, inventor, educator and researcher into the interface between music and technology — has developed novel approaches to electronics and is a trailblazer in the applications of artificial intelligence to music. "Overstory Overture" blends electronic and instrumental sonorities with DiDonato's voice and acting to portray the book's protagonist, the dendrologist Patricia Westerford. Four closely woven scenes distill not only her trajectory but also the novel's larger themes of communication, environmental devastation and what Machover described as "the necessity of getting outside yourself and of recognizing connections we

take for granted.”

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This isn’t the first operatic adaptation of Powers’s fiction. When the Belgian composer Kris Defoort’s reworking of “The Time of Our Singing” had its premiere in Brussels in 2021, it made for “a lovely closing of the circle,” Powers said, taking his music-centered narrative and “putting it back into musical form.”

But the challenges posed by “The Overstory” are different. Powers said several composers had expressed a desire to adapt it to the opera stage but he chose Machover because of a longstanding admiration for his music and a thematic affinity. He noted that works like Machover’s [“Death and the Powers: The Robots’ Opera”](#) (2010) examine issues of technology and its human ramifications that are very close to concerns in his earlier novels.

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“It was interesting to me that both Ted and I who had

It was interesting to me that both you and I, who had explored human-machine interdependence, have now delighted when he learned that she would create the role of Patricia Westerford — “the heart and soul of the whole book who ties all the rest of it together.”



DiDonato. Alex Hodor-Lee for The New York Times



Machover. Alex Hodor-Lee for The New York Times

Rather than become involved in creating the libretto, Powers said he preferred it to be done by “people who know how to target the viscera and the minds of people inside a concert hall in real time.” Machover turned to the British writer, actor and director Simon Robson, with whom he had collaborated on his opera [“Schoenberg in Hollywood”](#) (2018).

For this first part of the project, Robson compressed Powers’s delineation of Patricia throughout the sprawling novel into a sequence of scenes that evoke mythic archetypes as she comes to understand the hidden language of the forest. The soul and moral compass of the novel, she suffers with the trees the assault of “petrochemical props, chainsaw and machete” before finding peace in a new connection — which Machover sees as “what a different kind of synergy between a human being and the trees might feel like.”

Powers’s novel resonated strongly with DiDonato, she said, because of her multiyear, global touring project, “EDEN,” that addresses climate change and our place in nature. She also has a longstanding

connection to Machover: Her first leading role came in his 1999 opera “Resurrection,” based on a novella by Tolstoy. “That was the first time I was able to make my mark as a complete artist,” she said in an interview.

Finding a vocal language for Patricia was collaborative, “totally a Tod Machover experience,” she said. “We looked for what kind of sounds we could create from me and in conjunction with the electronics and the acoustic instruments as well.”

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The process was playful. “But it had a deep level as well,” she added, “because both of us are passionate about this topic. Patricia is discovering these sounds that the human ear hasn’t heard before.”



The orchestra — string players, a marimba and a bass drum — rehearsing. The ensemble becomes a metaphor for the forest. Alex Hodor-Lee for The New York Times

The orchestral ensemble — 19 string players

augmented by a five-octave marimba and a low bass drum — becomes a metaphor for the forest. The electronics play a multifaceted role: sonic fragments recombine to mimic chemical signaling, the process used by the trees to communicate and interact, even to warn of the harsh human threat. Patricia’s decoding of this plant language is based on the work of the scientific pioneer [Suzanne Simard](#), who also was an inspiration for James Cameron’s “Avatar.”

Yet for all the technological intervention, it’s melody, the most natural of musical elements, that is accorded critical importance here. “I tried to make the melodic line very present — one big development from beginning to end,” Machover said. Plans for a larger-scale “Overstory” opera are still being put in place, but “Overstory Overture” maps out a musical language that he expects to incorporate.

“There is a music in words,” Powers said. “When I write, I try to use that music to support the semantic underpinnings of the story.” When a composer like Tod Machover adapts this to a musical form, “he is also exploring that equivalent from the other side — to take the meaning of the words and put them back into a soundscape that will embody that meaning.”

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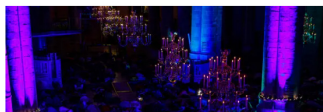
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