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A decade in the making, world premiere of ‘The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing’ arrives at COT at the right time

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/ct-ent-alan-turing-chicago-opera-20230314-dw2qnjnl5nftnmrkndu56blbb4-story.html>

By **Hannah Edgar**

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For as much as we know about the pioneering British computer scientist Alan Turing, we know relatively little about his death.

Turing was found dead at his home in 1954, two years after he was outed as a gay man, tried for “gross indecency” and sentenced to involuntary hormone treatments. A post-mortem inquest concluded he’d died by suicide after biting into a cyanide-laced apple. Though the apple itself was never tested for cyanide, Turing loved “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and often recited a couplet from the film while toiling over German codes: *Dip the apple in the brew, let the sleeping death seep through*. Turing’s mother rejected the findings, insisting he’d accidentally poisoned himself.

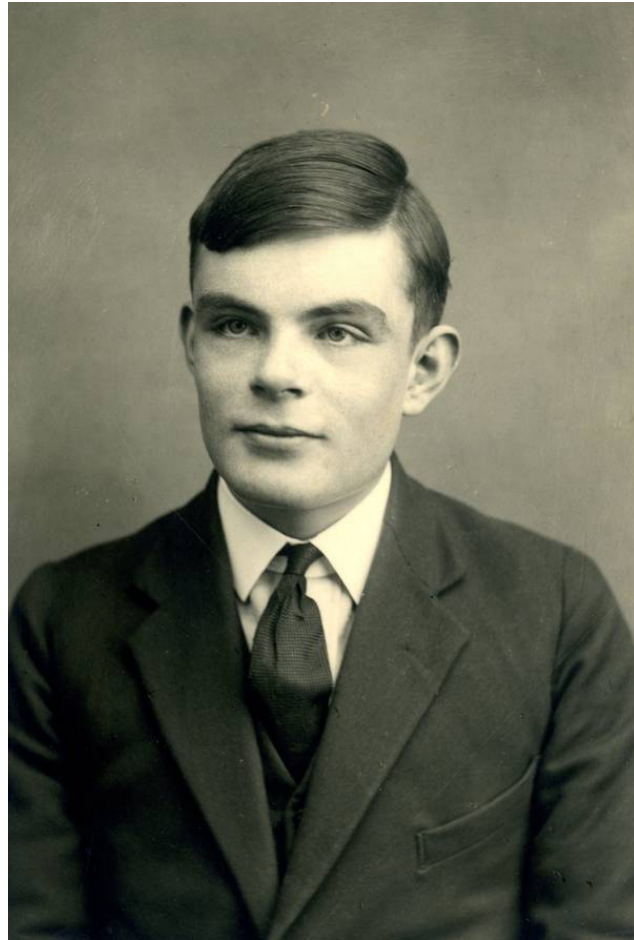
Others still suspect foul play. The McCarthyist “lavender scare” was in full swing, associating homosexuality with communist sympathies. Turing, a prominent gay man once privy to top-secret international military intelligence, would have been a prime target for investigation, or worse.



“The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing,” an opera by composer Justine F. Chen and librettist David Simpatico premiering at Chicago Opera Theater March 23 and 25, doesn’t shy away from these uncertainties. Instead, it takes a page from quantum mechanics and leans into them. What if all these hypotheticals were true, simultaneously? And what others have we failed to consider?

“We’re calling it a fantasia of historic proportions,” Simpatico says. “We weren’t interested in making a documentary — there’s lots of documentaries. It’s a story inspired by this man and our imaginings around his life.”

Unsurprisingly, it proved a tall order to sum up the life of *this* particular man, a strong contender for the 20th century’s most influential mind. Turing’s research is roundly acknowledged to have paved the way for modern computing and artificial intelligence. Perhaps most famously, he led a team of English cryptanalysts to crack German naval codes, expediting the end of World War II and likely saving millions of lives, a story told in the 2014 movie “The Imitation Game.” He was also an eccentric, sometimes jogging nearly 40 miles to meetings or biking to work with a gas mask to avoid seasonal allergies.



Chen and Simpatico have been working on “Alan Turing” since new-works incubator American Lyric Theater commissioned the opera in 2012. In the intervening years, the opera’s scope has tightened and, in some cases, simplified. Chen and Simpatico laughed as they recounted an early attempt to explain, in song, a paper of Turing’s that theorized the function of modern digital computers (1936’s [“On Computable Numbers”](#)). [Charles Petzold](#) — a Turing researcher and author of groundbreaking early texts on computer programming — advised on the project and nudged them in the right direction.

“We asked, ‘Charles, this is right?’ and he was like, ‘... Not really,’” Chen recounted as Petzold chuckled. “But in the end, what’s important is his humanity and everyone else’s connection with Turing, not our understanding of ‘Computable Numbers.’ How the enigma machine worked was not important to the opera.”

“Alan Turing” pinballs between scenes in the theorist’s life — seven of them, a nod to his beloved “Snow White” — like a free-association game, connected by dense, spoken choruses. The narrative is mostly linear but often feels unstuck from time or even a single reality. Think biopic meets “Everything Everywhere All At Once.”

Unlike most new works presented under the COT banner, music director Lidiya Yankovskaya has already been involved with “Alan Turing” for years, leading early vocal workshops at American Lyric Theater and orchestral workshops with COT in 2019. She praised the creativity of Chen’s score — all acoustic but sometimes evoking the sounds of the decoding machines Turing and his team used — and the way the opera leans on interstitial choruses to situate listeners in the narrative.

“It’s about the reverberations of what he brought to the world. What does it mean to live on after you die, both literally and figuratively?” Yankovskaya says.

If there ever was a time to heed the lessons of Turing’s life, it’s now. The Cold War-era moral panic that led to Turing’s forced sterilization evokes painful parallels to today, with the LGBTQ community and transgender people especially targeted as pawns in a broader culture war. Turing also left us plenty of guideposts about the future of AI, like his “[Turing test](#)”: If a human cannot decipher the difference between a computer’s and a human’s response to a given task, according to the test, the computer can be said to be capable of autonomous thought.

Petzold finds the Turing test outmoded now — too much emphasis on cogitation, he says, and not nearly enough on more urgent, and elusive, questions about AI’s capacity for sentience and self-awareness, “or what we call consciousness.” But in an increasingly automated world, Petzold sees stories like Turing’s as having plenty to say about what it means to be human.

“I’m going to start writing in such a way that nobody will ever mistake it for an AI program! I want to reassert the wackiness of humanity,” Petzold says. “This opera is not something that ChatGPT could have written.”

Chicago Opera Theater’s “The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing,” 7:30 p.m. March 23 and 3 p.m. March 25 at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.; tickets \$25-\$165 at chicagooperatheater.org

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