

Jennifer Robinson delivered it with charm and assurance. Ariana Troxell-Layton displayed musicality and vocal cultivation as the modest dreamer Marie. Parry had Charlotte Jakobs (Maguelonne) and Sara Zerilli (Armeline) ham it up a bit—audiences have come to expect this—but both showed pleasant timbres and promise. The fresh-voiced tenor Vincenzo Fiorito (Le Prince Charmant) and Troxell-Layton made a handsome, ardent couple; their duet ‘C’est moi, ne craignez rien!’ marked a musical highlight.



Ariana Troxell-Layton in the title role of Pauline Viardot’s ‘Cendrillon’ at the Manhattan School of Music

The baritone Jacob Soulliere (as the arriviste stepfather Baron Pictordu) and the tenor Brandon Pencheff-Martin (as the chamberlain Comte Barigoule) offered droll energy but lacked the stylistic sophistication for their extended comic-genre duet, a steeper climb than the rest of the tuneful, dance-rhythm-laden score. But the ensemble work throughout was good and Viardot’s work made a pleasant, novel experience.

HEARTBEAT OPERA scored another success with *Yevgeny Onegin* (seen on April 13), directed with insight and flair by Dustin Wills. As played on the intimate stage of the BARUCH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER’s black box theatre, the opera began with Lensky retrieving a prop from a rehearsal stage. Wills’s sometimes ironic narrative focus and shifting set units (manipulated by the cast and crew) underlined the staging’s metatheatricity. Costumes (Haydee Zelideth and Asa Benally) and lighting (Reza Behjat) were expertly calibrated to Wills’s shifts between the levels of storytelling. As one savvy professional remarked, the ‘secret sauce’ of Heartbeat’s endeavours lies in Daniel Schlosberg’s inventive, eclectic and often surprisingly illuminating musical adaptations. Here the versatile Jacob Ashworth led (while playing his violin) a crack ensemble of nine, with welcomingly unexpected touches from electric strings but also saxophone and balalaika. The cuts—down to 100 uninterrupted minutes—were judicious, mostly choral and dance passages. The name-day party’s almost Verdian *concertato* came off surprisingly well, not only musically but through Wills’s detailed direction. For the scorching final duet Onegin and Tatyana performed in a framed, constraining proscenium while the rest looked on, sometimes applauding. Regarding the announced trope of ‘queering *Onegin*’, Wills laudably avoided the drag bar and Tom of Finland clichés that have characterized previous such efforts in Europe, concentrating instead on Onegin and Lensky (and by extension the Larin sisters) struggling with the implications and consequences of unexpected and only partially realized desires. Onegin feels free to seduce (and touch) his other three coevals when so inclined. In the duel scene, his fatal shot seems to result from a surge of



Roy Hage and Edwin Joseph as Lensky and Onegin in Heartbeat Opera's Tchaikovsky production

internalized homophobia after Lensky plants a very forthright kiss.

Edwin Joseph (Onegin) and Roy Hage (Lensky) brought detailed acting skills to limning Wills's conception of their ambiguous, lust-freighted friendship. The baritone has fine presence and a nicely resonant instrument stronger on the top than the bottom; what he is missing—at least in a language that he was clearly traversing syllabically—is the sense of phrasing, of sculpted musical

lines, that his colleagues command. The tenor started the evening with somewhat too much vibrancy but by 'V vashem dome' was managing a fine dynamic palette. He gave himself fully to tracing the heartbreak of 'Kuda, kuda', winning an ovation. Emily Margevich recently triumphed as Tatyana at Opera Baltimore (May, pp. 622-3) and again brought the vulnerable heroine to vivid life, vocalizing extremely well save for one or two flat attacks. Hers was the best Russian diction. She worked in fine tandem with the delightful Olga of the livewire Mexican mezzo Sishel Claverie. The three other singers all also proved versatile and attractive performers. Shannon Delijani made her sonorous Larina an amusingly vain diva within both the 'performed' and the 'rehearsal' portions. Tynan Davis created an engaged, distinctly youthful Filippievna, though her fine lyric alto sounded better suited to Bach. Prince Gremin's lone aria, in ABA form, confirmed Wills's tendency to editorialize as to Tchaikovsky's more conventional 'numbers': having Lensky's first aria sent up—not least by Claverie's sceptical Olga—worked very well, but Lloyd Reshard Jr, singing Gremin, was handed the long-tired gag of performing his aria into a standing radio mic. He sang the first part with beautiful tonal focus but—as many non-native singers do—made rather a hash of the middle section's verbal challenges. A stagehand with a hand truck then whisked the bass off before he could resume the big show-stopping tune. Funny, certainly; but musically rather unsatisfying. The first two acts' dramatic arc cohered better than the (not uninteresting) attempt to present the world of St Petersburg society through a lens of mechanized phantasmagoria. But it was clear that Dustin Wills has a potentially brilliant future directing opera, and that Heartbeat continues to fulfil its genre-revitalizing mission with gusto and imagination.

DAVID SHENGOLD

## New York

On a planet that seems to have a death wish in the face of galloping climate change, should we really be thinking about having children? If we do bring new lives into this world, will they be inheriting only a legacy of devastation?



The problem plagues the minds of Generations Y and Z as well as millennials. Now it's finding its way into modern opera, and HEARTBEAT OPERA's premiere of *The Extinctionist* (seen on April 14) is an excellent example. Composed by Heartbeat's music director Daniel Schlosberg to a libretto by Amanda Quaid, based on her play, and originally conceived with Louisa Proske, this 75-minute opera has been in development for three years. An earlier Heartbeat production of it in Chatham, NY, in 2021 showed its promise; today it is a work of remarkable impact.

Heartbeat has been pushing boundaries since its inception ten years ago. Until now they have done radically rethought versions of classic operas including *Carmen*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Yevgeny Onegin* (see above). As the company's first premiere, *The Extinctionist* is a home-grown product, conceived by one of its founders and composed and conducted by its music director. The result is an intimate, small-scale work—four singers, four instrumentalists, one act—that delivers a knockout punch to the audience. It's about a young Woman (none of the characters is given a name) who is caught in the dilemma of wanting a baby but also grappling with the fear of what kind of future a child could possibly have in a world that is headed for destruction. The Man—her husband, or possibly her romantic partner—has no such concerns. His desire for progeny grows in direct proportion to the Woman's doubts. Her visits to her methodical doctor and her time spent with a friend who becomes pregnant and does not share her fears do nothing to assuage her. By the opera's end, she is in full-on torment and her life is collapsing.

Schlosberg's theatrically effective score aptly reflects the Woman's troubled mind and the encroaching fear that surrounds her, keeping his audience as unsettled as his heroine. There are, as well, moments in the score filled with great tenderness and beauty—but, inevitably, they remain brief and infrequent in this traumatizing context. Quaid's cinematically structured libretto, written in casual, conversational English, brings the reality of the Woman's situation very close to home—as did Shadi Ghaheri's direction, which was enhanced by the spare production design of Kate Noll. The costumes, co-designed by Haydee Zelideth and Asa Benally, suited the essentially realistic concept. It was Reza Behjat's lighting and the often striking, often disturbing projections by Camilla Tassi that edged the presentation into the realm of nightmare, particularly in an unnerving sequence in which the Woman endured a painful gynaecological exam.

The Woman is the central character and is on stage non-stop. Katherine Henly gave a tour-de-force performance in the role, stretching her essentially lyric soprano to thrillingly dramatic extremes, and making very

Heartbeat Opera's first premiere: 'The Extinctionist', with Philip Stoddard and Katherine Henly



pointed use of her impressive upper register. The traditional opera repertory offers lyric sopranos few roles of such unbridled intensity, and Henly made the most of this one. The three other roles are far less showy. With her attractive stage presence and appealing timbre, the soprano Claire Leyden lent fine support in the role of the Friend. The baritone Philip Stoddard, as the Man, did not really register strongly; his voice and presence seemed unnecessarily subdued in this context. Eliam Ramos did not have a great amount of stage time as the Doctor, but his performance was a believable one, and his smooth bass-baritone served it well.

Schlosberg conducted his own score. The four-person accompaniment, which he led from the piano, consisted of violin and viola, electric guitar and percussion. In the intimate confines of the BARUCH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, one was able to sense a promising new path being forged for contemporary chamber opera. ERIC MYERS

## San Francisco

The evening was called ‘Birds & Balls’, but there were no birds and no balls. Still, this comic double bill (seen on April 5) had its conceptual cleverness. Too bad it was only the first half of the programme, not the premiere, that really worked.

The bill, presented by the frisky OPERA PARALLÈLE company at the SFJAZZ MINER AUDITORIUM, began with *Vinkensport, or the Finch Opera*, by David T. Little and Royce Vavrek, a satyr-play adjunct to their terrifying, apocalyptic *Dog Days*. Then, after a brief pause, came the premiere of *Balls*, about the 1973 ‘battle of the sexes’ tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs.

Nicole Paiement, the company’s Canadian-born artistic director and sure conductor, had been looking for short operas to be paired on a single programme. She was seconded by Brian Staufenbiel, the company’s creative director and the stage director of this programme. The two settled on these two operas about sport, or at least competition, which Staufenbiel struggled to link.

*Vinkensport* was first heard in a student performance at Bard College in 2010. It was subsequently commissioned for a reduced ensemble by Opera Saratoga, where I heard it in 2018 and pronounced it a ‘charmer’ with ‘tuneful but sophisticated and original’ music (October 2018, pp. 1267-8).

The opera is about a curious Flemish ‘sport’ in which caged finches compete for the number of times they can tweet in an hour. We never see the birds. The opera focuses on the foibles and tribulations of their owners, some comic, some sad. It ends with a touching scene in which the owner of Atticus Finch—all the birds have cute names, like Farinelli and Hans Sachs and Sir Elton John—fulfils his promise to free his finch after ten years of companionship.

Little’s music is deft, understated and charming. And Opera Parallèle gave it its due, with Daniel Cilli, despite a worn baritone, a standout in the emotional final farewell.

Behind the libretto for *Balls* seemed to be two books, uncredited in the programme, by Grace Lichtenstein, entitled *A Long Way, Baby: Behind the Scenes in Women’s Pro Tennis* (1974, published after the King-Riggs match), and *Machisma: Women and Daring* (1981). Those titles give an indication of the outspoken feminist essence of this opera. The actual 1973 match had its deliberately parodistic aspects, such as Riggs’s