

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# As Heartbeat Opera Reaches a Milestone, So Does Its Musical Leader

Dan Schlosberg, who for 10 years has adapted opera classics for the company, has written its first world premiere.



By Joshua Barone

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For the last decade, Heartbeat Opera has treated the classics like rough drafts: The scores of “Carmen” and “Madama Butterfly,” “Fidelio” and “Der Freischütz” have been starting points for something fresh, urgent and immediate.

In New York, a city with fewer and fewer spaces for opera, Heartbeat sits harmoniously between the Prototype Festival, which stages new music theater at a chamber scale, and the grand tradition of the Metropolitan Opera. Heartbeat draws from the canon but reimagines it with an avant-garde spirit and an eye toward the issues of our time: gun violence, Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement.

Performed on intimate stages, the resulting productions smartly elicit strong reactions, whatever those may be. I haven’t liked all of Heartbeat’s shows, but I’ve never walked away with a shrug, and I’ve never regretted going.

Now, in its 10th year, the company is adding something truly new to the mix: a world premiere, “The Extinctionist,” which opened on Wednesday at the Baruch Performing Arts Center as part of Heartbeat’s 2024 repertory season, alongside Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin.”

It’s fitting that “The Extinctionist,” an opera with good bones but a flawed presentation, is composed by Dan Schlosberg. He has been the musical soul of Heartbeat since its founding, adapting works by Puccini, Donizetti and more with a vision as creative as each production’s director.



Schlosberg rehearsing with the company. He leads “The Extinctionist” from the piano. George Etheredge for The New York Times

This season has been particularly busy for Schlosberg, who created Heartbeat's version of "Onegin" in addition to his work on "The Extinctionist." (He also performs in the premiere's quartet of instrumentalists, leading them from the piano.) But this is all business as usual for him, and essential to his vision for opera.

"Opera should take cues from theater, in that it's malleable," Schlosberg, 36, said in an interview between rehearsals recently. "The score, for us, is a sandbox." It has been since the beginning of Heartbeat, he added. "I'm really glad that we're still here," he said. "We do not take that for granted."

Heartbeat was founded by the stage directors Louisa Proske and Ethan Heard, with Schlosberg and Jacob Ashworth, a lively violinist and conductor, as the music directors. When new productions are developed, the librettos and scores are adapted together; the company's "Lucia di Lammermoor," for example, was set in an asylum and spun from the mind of a patient whose psychology was reflected in Schlosberg's mercurial arrangement for five instrumentalists.

Schlosberg doesn't aim to replicate operas at a smaller scale. He works from both full and piano-vocal scores to get a sense of a piece's architecture, yet leaves himself room to newly express chords and textures. Sometimes he acts as a translator; other times, as an interpreter. "Why reduce in order to attain a version of something that was meant for so many more people?" he said. "Why not reinvent?"

It's a nimble, open-minded approach that represents Heartbeat as a whole — and its history. Proske and Heard, who used to direct one festival production each, with one conducted by Ashworth and the other by Schlosberg, have left the company while remaining on its governing board. It is now run by Ashworth; Schlosberg is the sole music director.

New directors, including those from outside the world of opera, have stepped in. "Onegin," which opened on Tuesday, was staged by Dustin Wills, primarily a theater director, in his company debut.

Wills's overthought production puts a queer spin on the work, an idea that has been taken up by more experienced opera directors like Krzysztof Warlikowski, but in the process he depicts something more interesting: the theatricality of emotions that young people perform without really knowing what they mean.



Schlosberg on the set of his opera "The Extinctionist," which depicts a mind crumbling under the unfolding catastrophes of the climate crisis. George Etherege for The New York Times

Onegin (an ardent Edwin Joseph) and Lensky (a vocally thin Roy Hage) are here secretly lovers while dramatically courting Tatyana (Emily Margevich, charismatic and commanding) and her best friend, Olga (Sishel Claverie, energetic and alluring). Their romantic language is overblown and overexpressed, its artifice amplified by Wills's direction and scenic design; the action unfolds like a rehearsal of "Onegin" in a theater's workshop.

Crew members are seen building sets before they are brought out for use; in a breathtaking coup de théâtre, Tatyana's bedroom wall transforms into a stage and banquet table for a lavish party. The climactic encounter between Onegin and Tatyana, years after he rejected her, is set in a pop-up theater.

This is a persuasive concept, one that maps easily onto the score and gets at its rash youthfulness and rueful adulthood. But Wills goes further: Onegin, in his performative heterosexuality, kills Lensky, his best friend and lover, in a duel. That tragedy becomes strained, though, by the time Onegin begs for Tatyana's hand. He insists on a conventional life that he could easily escape.

Schlosberg's adaptation, conducted by Ashworth, leans into this self-aware, borderline Brechtian theatricality with a pit band whose sound is reminiscent of "The Threepenny Opera," if its banjo were replaced with a balalaika. In Act II, Schlosberg warps a joyous waltz into something nightmarish and agonizingly amorphous, an expression of inner torment that also courses through his "Extinctionist."

Adapted by Amanda Quaid from her play of the same name, this opera depicts a mind crumbling under the mounting catastrophes of the climate crisis; in that sense it is the inverse of sweeping dramas about apocalyptic systems, and of another recent opera, Ellen Reid and Roxie Perkins's kaleidoscopic "The Shell Trial."

Here, one woman (Katherine Henly, tireless in a role with equal demands on her voice and acting skills) is whisked from scene to scene, like a latter-day Wozzeck. Her relationships crumble around her insistence on seizing control where she can, by not bringing a baby into a doomed world and accelerating its destruction. This is to the dismay of her partner (Philip Stoddard, not entirely comfortable in an operatic mode) and her best friend (a shape-shifting and likable Claire Leyden), and to the frustration of her doctor (a warm but firm Eliam Ramos).



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Shadi Ghaheri's production, with scenic design by Kate Noll and costumes by Haydee Zelideth and Asa Benally, suggests the near future — near enough that the woman still uses Facebook, but with the chic, mostly white sci-fi minimalism. This clean environment, in a heavy-handed gesture, is dotted with patches of dead trees from a drought-stricken landscape, and often covered with projections of bluntly emotional text and videos of smoldering disasters. The tone and style sometimes seem confused; a scene at the doctor's office is depicted with literally clinical detail, while another features a child puppet.

Quaid's libretto and Schlosberg's treatment of it are more sure of themselves. Schlosberg's instrumental writing doesn't necessarily drive the drama, as opera orchestras often do, but rather plays a part in it, mirroring the cast of four with a quartet. The woman's vocal line is doubled at one point by a violin with pathos, and is virtually replaced at another by an electric guitar solo.

The ensemble also betrays the woman's emotions, and anticipates the increasingly sharp turns of her mental state, including with a tense, thumping rhythm like a heartbeat. Approaching the text with patience, Schlosberg repeats words and phrases, and turns the "ha" of laughter into a musical scream.

At the keyboard on Wednesday, Schlosberg looked as busy as ever, gesturing beats, playing the piano, sometimes reaching into the instrument, breathing textures into a microphone and operating a sound board. After 10 years of this, and as Heartbeat looks ahead to a no-less-ambitious 2025 festival of Strauss's "Salome" and Massenet's "Manon," you get the sense that he wouldn't have it any other way.

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