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His Dark Materials

DAVID LANG'S compositions are engineered for maximum impact.

by Adam Wasserman.



anatomy theater at LA Opera, 2016

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n become *smarter* about what you can do to change the world.”



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“I LOVE THE IDEA THAT I HAVE TO MAKE A DECISION about everything in my pieces,” says David Lang, who, at sixty, is one of the most prolific American composers working today. This month, New York audiences can catch two of Lang’s works in high-profile premieres: New York City Ballet mounts a new piece by choreographer/filmmaker Pontus Lidberg, set to a Lang score; and the Prototype Festival presents the New York City premiere of his haunting opera *anatomy theater*.

Given its world premiere at LA Opera last June, *anatomy theater* shows how Lang’s decisions—including the avoidance of capital letters in most of his compositions’ titles—have placed him at the forefront of the twenty-first century’s wildly eclectic post-minimalist music scene. Based on eighteenth-century medical and legal texts, the piece dramatizes the execution and public dissection of a murderess, Sarah Osborne, who, through the magic of opera, continues to sing while an anatomist and his assistant search for the corporeal root of her evil.

Speaking in early October in the SoHo apartment that he shares with his wife, visual artist Suzanne Bocanegra, Lang says audiences shouldn’t be put off by the opera’s grisly subject. “The history of opera is, in one way, a catalogue of men doing horrible things to women,” he says. Partnered by conceptual artist Mark Dion, who cowrote the libretto, Lang has written music that’s by turns raucous, vaudevillian and Romantic in exploring some fundamental questions. “How do we protect ourselves from the things that we can’t know?” he says. “You can become smarter about what you can do to change the world, but for some people it’s more tempting to say, ‘No, I can categorically say that these other people are always going to be evil. If I could only separate from them, or if I could only punish them, I would be safe.’”

It’s a typically outré subject for a composer who writes intimately scaled, subtly unnerving music to give voice to characters on the fringes. A cofounder of Bang on a Can and a fixture on the downtown New York scene, Lang received the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2008 for *the little match girl passion*, a heartrending thirty-five-minute work that adapted the story of Hans Christian Andersen’s dying child for a quartet of voices and simple percussion. A fragile, porcelain figurine of a piece, *little match girl* marked

a watershed moment in Lang's working method.

"I created this incredible structure that was very formal, and I had this real conception in my head about how everything worked," he says of the piece. "And early on in the process, I wrote this really beautiful melody. But every time I thought about that movement, I realized that there was something really wrong with it—this beautiful melody made me focus on how great that single moment was, and anything that took my attention off the long structure was a distraction. So I took that melody out—I made another piece out of it. I ended up realizing that I really have to just do enough with the music so that the text and the sounds and the singers can make this large structure happen."



the public domain at the 2016 Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center
© Richard Termine

Lang's emphasis on framework has led him to a variety of compositional formats. "I spend a huge amount of time thinking about kind of the ground rules for how a piece works, or how something changes across time, or how a character exists," he says. "I spend very little time actually trying to make the notes on paper." Last summer, the Mostly Mozart Festival gave the premiere of Lang's *public domain*, a community-minded choral work performed by 1,000 volunteers from across the city. "*The public domain* presented this problem of how to take the things that I really like in music and translate them so that non-professionals can do them," Lang says.

On the other end of the emotional and compositional spectrum was *the loser*, his one-act monodrama for baritone, unveiled last September at BAM's Next Wave Festival. The work recounts the story of a piano prodigy who withers after briefly meeting a young Glenn Gould. "That was a really personal piece for me," says Lang. "This idea that you have to invest yourself completely into being a musician before you can live at a high enough level to see for yourself whether it's worth it for you to have given up all of that time to be a musician—that's terrifying. I think about that all the time."

Lang is at work on a Seattle Symphony commission that is a tribute to Soviet-era poet Anna Akhmatova. Next year his *mile long opera* will be staged on New York City's elevated High Line park. "Of course, the secret of business is repeat business," Lang says. "I don't need to be the kind of person who works with every single opera company or orchestra in the world. I really just need to find a few people who will believe in me, and people I can trust. And then I can work with them forever." ■