

Contra Costa Times

## 'The Tyrant' resounds with authority

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By Georgia Rowe  
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The figure of the lonely despot has been a staple for authors, playwrights, composers and librettists throughout the centuries. But few have been drawn with such economy -- or potency -- as "The Tyrant."

Short, beautifully scored and unremittingly intense, Paul Dresher's chamber opera creates a surprisingly complex and compelling portrait of its anguished anti-hero. The premise -- that absolute power is its own punishment -- is hardly new. But, as performed by the superb tenor John Duykers and six members of the Paul Dresher Ensemble, the 65-minute work yields more psycho-political thrills than many evening-length works.

The opera, which opened Thursday in the Zellerbach Playhouse as the first offering of Cal Performances' Berkeley Edge Fest, has its final performance tonight (the biennial new music festival continues through Sunday afternoon with a program devoted to composer Frederic Rzewski).

Inspired by Italo Calvino's short story "A King Listens," Dresher's 2006 opera portrays the ruler of a nameless kingdom (audience members can supply the dictator of their choice), who is unable to leave his room for fear of being overthrown. Enconced on an oversized throne in a cagelike structure (set by Alex Nichols, with lighting by Tom Ontiveros), cowering in terror at real and imagined threats, he experiences the outside world only through sound and the occasional furtive peek through a curtained window. Black and white security-cam images projected on rear screens evoke a creepy sense of full-time surveillance.

Staged for maximum dramatic effect by Melissa Weaver, the opera opens on the 20th anniversary of the tyrant's ascent to power, with him writing -- what else? -- a speech designed to rally his subjects. Dressed in a pinstripe suit and diamond-crusted beret, medals pinned to his chest, Duykers looks every inch a king. But his paranoid musings -- "So many enemies huddled just outside" -- reveal a mind beset by madness.

Librettist Jim Lewis gets in some witty jabs at ego-driven rulers. The tyrant expounds on the perks of the job ("The sex is good"), and the speech-in-progress, with its familiar echoes of freedom under attack, ends up in a wad on the floor ("Not believable").

But levity gives way to something more sobering as the opera proceeds to its dark conclusion. Tormented by an erotic longing triggered by the sound of a woman's voice, haunted by the ghost of his predecessor -- who may or may not be imprisoned in the dungeon below -- and driven to the "rebellion" that leaves him vulnerable outside the palace walls, Duykers loses his grip, and "The Tyrant" achieves the frightening power of a fever dream.

Composed for piano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello and percussion, Dresher's score boils and surges with vitality, encompassing electric modernism, militant marches and moments of tender lyricism. The writing for tenor alternates between spoken text and virtuoso arias; Thursday, Duykers delivered them with dramatic authority and vocal allure. "The Tyrant" seems destined for a life of its own, but it may never get a better performance than this one.