

THE PLAIN DEALER

Powerful blend of music, staging in power' opera

Thursday, May 04, 2006

Donald Rosenberg

Plain Dealer Music Critic

We all hear voices, surely in reality and possibly in our minds. The title (and only) character in "The Tyrant," a new opera by Paul Dresher and Jim Lewis, is haunted by sounds vocal and otherwise, a phenomenon that prompts him to question every aspect of his pathetic existence.

Spending an hour with this complicated fellow turns out not to be a depressing experience. As portrayed by composer Dresher and librettist Lewis and sung with stellar urgency by tenor John Duykers, "The Tyrant" is a compelling study in paranoia, pettiness and pretension, just a few of the qualities that inhabit those for whom power is paramount.

This "solo chamber opera for tenor and six instruments" began a five-performance run Tuesday at the Cleveland Play House's Bolton Theatre as part of FusionFest. A presentation of the Cleveland Play House and Opera Cleveland, the work melds musical and theatrical aspects with fine concision and intensity.

The stage is dominated by the tyrant's throne room, which resembles a cage for a dangerous animal. On either side of the platform reside the musicians of the Paul Dresher Ensemble, whose piquant sonic comments the tyrant occasionally acknowledges. Above the players, two screens project security-camera scenes of the protagonist, who sometimes picks up a hand-held camera to emote directly into this big-brother device.

Based loosely on Italo Calvino's "The King Listens," the opera follows the tyrant through a series of cathartic confessions. Marking the 20th anniversary of his rule, he begins to devise a speech when nearby sounds interrupt his thoughts and send him pondering the ecstasies and agonies of his authoritative post.

The tyrant sings or declaims of his satisfactory sex life, despite the need to keep his "imperial posterior" on the throne, and switches emotional gears often as notions of rebellion, lust and freedom penetrate his addled brain. Toward the end, he escapes from his cage, only to find himself trapped in the palace dungeon with "a divine clamor." Translation: a terrible silence.

The opera, performed without intermission, holds its grip through Melissa Weaver's discreet staging, Tom Ontiveros' spectral lighting and the seamless union of Lewis' pointed, humane libretto and Dresher's eclectic score. The music embraces pungent and delicate modernism even as it teases deftly with anxious waltz figures, menacing marches and expansive lyricism.

Dresher makes splendid use of his superb musicians, establishing myriad atmospheres and telling interactions between Duykers and the players, especially the extremely busy percussionist, Joel Davel.

Onstage for the opera's entire 65 minutes, Duykers brings a gamut of vivid inflections to the tyrant's frustrations and rantings. Dresher's vocal writing is grateful until the despot heads into the most apprehensive regions of his soul, which usually means his high register. Duykers copes boldly with the demands, seizing the character's psyche by throat and body.