

Concert Review

Solo chamber opera "The Tyrant" is a tour-de-force

By Melinda Bargreen

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Music lovers with long memories will remember a particular flowering of talent at Cornish College of the Arts, back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when an imposing infusion of talent arrived on the faculty. Tenor John Duykers, and composers Paul Dresher and Janice Giteck, were among the leading lights, along with flutist and new-music impresario Paul Taub.

Dresher and Duykers left Seattle, but the Cornish connection continues in Dresher's new "The Tyrant," a solo chamber opera composed for the tenor, with a Jim Lewis libretto and staging by Melissa Weaver. "The Tyrant" was commissioned by Taub's Seattle Chamber Players, whose members and two guests formed the six-piece ensemble accompanying the singer/actor. (The commission is a joint one with three other ensembles.)

It is a pleasure to report that "The Tyrant" is a tour-de-force — a gripping music-theater piece that is witty, poignant and wonderfully effective. Dresher's original "maxi-minimalist" style has grown and expanded to a more mature style with considerable freedom, though you can still hear those gently oscillating motifs from time to time. Amplification, probably necessary in the Behnke Center with these forces, helped make everything (including the soloist) clear.

Duykers was absolutely mesmerizing in the role of the king who dare not leave his throne for fear of being overthrown. It's hard to imagine anyone else as eerily effective in the role he has made so wholly his own. One of the world's pre-eminent specialists in contemporary music, Duykers still commands a pliant and suitably majestic tenor, more than capable of meeting the score's stringent demands.

But he is considerably more than a singer. His thoroughly detailed presentation of the Tyrant waxes and wanes from imperious irony to yearning, terror, paranoia, infatuation (with a beautiful voice heard through his window), despair and resignation. This performance will be recorded, along with Duykers' interpretation of Maxwell Davies' "Eight Songs for a Mad King," but it should be filmed as well; what Duykers does with his face and body, as well as his voice, should be commemorated for posterity.

The virtuoso ensemble, led by Christian Knapp, was everything it should be. Two instrumental pieces, each with theater aspects, preceded the new Dresher work: John Zorn's "Music for Children" and Viktor Ekimovsky's "The Princess has pricked her finger — and all the Kingdom fell asleep ... " These were mere foothills; "The Tyrant" is a mountain.