

REVIEW

Scary at the top for Drescher's 'Tyrant'

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Whatever you might think, it isn't easy being a bloodthirsty autocrat.

The protagonist of "The Tyrant," the new monodrama by composer Paul Drescher and librettist Jim Lewis, may have an entire realm at his beck and call, but he's painfully aware that his grasp of power is only as strong as his control of the physical throne he occupies. So he's reduced to spending his entire life there -- even a visit to the john, in this paranoid political fable, might invite a coup.

As embodied with wonderfully reptilian anguish by tenor John Duykers in an excerpted performance Friday night at Theatre Artaud, the nameless tyrant is a mixture of self-assurance and terror. At one moment he is expansive about the erotic perks that come with the job; at the next, he flinches at some ominous noise that may presage his downfall.

Friday's performance offered only a tantalizing taste of the full work -- disconnected excerpts from the first of two acts that are scheduled for a complete premiere in Cleveland next month -- but that was enough to leave a listener eager for the rest.

As a composer, Drescher has always responded most readily to the stage, and his writing here is both fertile and intricate. The solo part shifts fluidly between spoken text and shapely arias, and the music, scored for six acoustic instruments, fades in and out of the worlds of tonality and rhythmic regularity.

The result is a musical landscape in which distinct set pieces sneak up and catch the listener unawares (not unlike the way more unpleasant surprises lie in wait for the tyrant himself). The first act ends with a lullaby of lovely, almost saccharine allure.

The dramatic setup may not be particularly new -- it's "Macbeth" filtered through Kafka and Calvino -- but Lewis' libretto mines this familiar territory with plenty of wit and grace.

The obvious precedent is "Eight Songs for a Mad King," Peter Maxwell Davies' 1969 music-theater tour de force about a raving George III surrounded by instrumentalists. In one theatrically savvy moment, Duykers brings his tyrannical authority to bear on a percussionist who's gotten a little too unfettered in his playing.

Duykers, in fact, was the main attraction of the performance, his singing potent and well modulated and his dramatic contribution terrifically nuanced.