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MUSIC REVIEW

Duykers brings 'Tyrant' to life

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Tenor John Duykers returned to Seattle Sunday night in an unforgettable portrayal of a tyrant, his persona one all too recognizable in many Third World countries and some in so-called more civilized countries, too.

His vehicle was the world premiere of a concert theater song cycle, "The Tyrant," by composer Paul Dresher and librettist Jim Lewis from a tale by Italo Calvino. Seattle Chamber Players commissioned it and performed the 45-minute work at On the Boards along with two shorter pieces.

Oddly, this was the second soliloquy of an obsessed man in music presented this past week in Seattle: The first was Schumann's "Manfred" performed by the Seattle Symphony, yet "The Tyrant" elicited more recognition, more understanding even, for Duykers' character.

On a small dais that has become his whole living space, the Tyrant's fears, needs, paranoia and, most chillingly, his methods of getting what he wants are there before you in Duykers. Sometimes speaking, sometimes singing, and always audible, he disintegrates before your eyes and ears.

The credit for this tour de force performance -- planned as a companion piece with Peter Maxwell Davies' "Eight Songs for a Mad King" for a compact disc -- has to be divided between the three: Dresher for atmospheric music (including a moment when percussionist Matthew Kocmierski tossed a garbage can full of cymbals out on the floor and rhythmic piano notes in the background pounded like the pulse of the tyrant); Lewis for memorable words, and Duykers for bringing it all to life.

Melissa Weaver directed with imagination, Tom Ontiveros designed the lighting with flair and conductor Christian Knapp held it all together.

Earlier in the program, violinist Mikhail Shmidt of the Seattle Chamber Players, pianist Oksana Ezhokina and Kocmierski played a brief work by John Zorn, and the four Seattle Chamber Players (Shmidt, cellist David Sabee, flutist Paul Taub and clarinetist Laura DeLuca) performed "The Princess has pricked her finger -- and all the Kingdom fell asleep" by Viktor Ekimovsky, a hypnotic work in slow motion in which even the performers seem barely awake.

Freelancer Philippa Kiraly has been writing on classical music in Seattle since 1991.

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