

Present Music makes 'Woman D'Este' shimmer

By TOM STRINI
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Sigmund Snopek's "Love Poems of the Woman D'Este" is a pleasure dome of sound.

Leslie Fitzwater and the Present Music Ensemble unveiled his recent expansion of an eight-song cycle from voice and piano to voice and mixed chamber octet Saturday evening at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Snopek's colors and gestures are shimmering and extravagant, an update on the old Orientalist mode. Think of a post-modern "Scheherezade," and you'll get the idiom. But subtract all post-modern irony and distancing; the composer and poet Cynthia D'Este are sincere about their fantastical, ecstatic vocabularies.

I'm not sure how D'Este's extravagances hold up on their own. For example: *Can you hear/the drum, my heart,/the windsong of my soulful breath/accompany your/inspired stroke/of strings upon/the golden lyre.*

But bathed in the glow of Sno-

pek's sonorities and swept along on his rhythms, and wrapped in the caressing heat of Fitzwater's voice, D'Este's words have some currency. John Harbison's "Mirabai" songs, a cycle on poems by a 16th-century female mystic who tinged religious devotion to Krishna with the erotic, also bloomed beneath Fitzwater's sensuality and musicianship.

The ensemble opened with a muscular reading of Kamran Ince's alternately raucous and iridescent "Waves of Talya" and filled the program with oddities grounded in what-if propositions: What if a disco-funk band played music by a 13th-century master (Eve Belgarian, "Machaut A GoGo"); What if a post-minimalist wrote a hard-rock song (Michael Torke, "Licking for Love"); What if Elvis had been a bassoonist obsessed with the "Dies Irae" (Michael Daugherty, "Dead Elvis").

This isn't great music, but Present Music played the day-lights out of it, and it at least served as a vivid reminder that anything can happen at a Present Music concert.