

## REVIEW

# Present Music takes on a program of hard stuff

Musicians give strong performances on a mixed bag of material

By TOM STRINI

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A sustained delirium of beauty is, I suspect, what Sigmund Snopek was after in "Azure, or Green, or Purple," which Present Music premiered Saturday. The 1935 text, by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, shimmers with sea imagery and language that splashes upon the ear. Snopek tried to match it with luminescent orchestration including strings, winds, percussion, keyboard and guitar and mandolin.

More often than not, it gur-

gled along in Philip Glass fashion, with the voices of soprano Tony Arnold and baritone Paul Rowe gliding above it. They sped through the eight stanzas in a brisk, rolling arioso, mostly at one note per syllable. The resulting sense of haste, a problematic sound mix, and too-dense orchestration obscured Pessoa's words. Too bad; it's a lovely meditation on generations of drowned sailors and humanity's place in the deep blue universe.

Snopek's melodic arcs are graceful and his orchestrations are often beautiful, but they don't quite dazzle enough. The harmonies are a little too mundane to really propel the music or seduce the ear. No compelling lines arise from the orchestra to twine round the

voices or enter into dialogue with them. For that matter, why couldn't the two voices interact, do more than move in parallel just about all of the time? The premiere sounded like a good start to a composition that needs to be taken further.

Artistic director Kevin Stalheim programmed the Snopek premiere alongside some of the most difficult repertoire his group has ever presented. Qu Xiaosong's "Mist" (1991) and Esa-Pekka Salonen's "Flood" (1982) must be monsters to rehearse; both teem with rhythmic complication and all manner of coordination issues, and both call for wild extended vocal techniques. Both revolve around free-floating, virtuoso musical gestures that require

huge technique and interpretive certainty.

"Mist," for large mixed ensemble, is Zen meets Expressionist avant-garde. In "Flood," for soprano, keyboard, piano, cello, clarinet and percussion, Elliott Carter (the big-brained, math-based avant-garde) meets Carl Stalling (the guy who wrote those insane Looney Tunes scores). The ensemble, with the remarkable Tony Arnold at the forefront, played both with unshakable conviction. Still, "Mist" skirted the edge of preciousness, and "Flood" wasn't quite as witty as it thinks it is.

Michael Gordon's "Weather One" (1997), a relentless pounding of crunching patterns for string sextet, sounds like folk music for some obscure East

European dance-'til-you-drop ritual. It was downright annoying amid the experience, but offered satisfying catharsis in its aftermath.

John Adams' "Hallelujah Junction" was the unmitigated hit of the show. It's tempting to say that pianists Phillip Bush and Lisa Kaplan blasted through Adams' juggernaut, but that wouldn't tell the whole story. All manner of intriguing cross-currents and lines threaded their way through the mix, and Bush and Kaplan made sure we heard the whole world of music within the general roar.

*The program took place at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Zelazo Center. E-mail Tom Strini at [tstrini@journalsentinel.com](mailto:tstrini@journalsentinel.com).*