

Show mixes fantasy with the mundane

By Tom Strini

Journal Critic at Large

Thanks to the music of James Pease and Sigmund Snopek, lively imagination ran neck and neck with academic drudgery at the Milwaukee Composers Festival concert Monday night in the Fine Arts Recital Hall of the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee.

The program opened with Israel Kremen's "Four Forms for Four," one of those grimly serious, doggedly '50s-modern items with which graduate students prove themselves dull enough to become professors. The type features cluster chords whacked out on the piano; short, knotty, fragmented melodic lines; and impossibly awkward rhythms.

This piece is for piano and, in turn, clarinet, bass clarinet — there's always a bass clarinet in these things, for some reason — alto saxophone and clarinet again. Kremen played the piano; the unfortunate woman who attempted the wind parts will go unnamed, because she gamely stepped in only when the scheduled players showed the good sense to be snowbound in Michigan.

Gregoria Karides Suchy's 1974 "Soliloquy Sans C," for solo violin, was another dose of academic cacophony — more "dramatic" register jumping, more fragmentation, more low-grade hysteria.

Like Kremen, Suchy, a UWM faculty composer, got scant help from her performer. A really nuts, rip-off-the-strings rendition might have had some interest; Leonard Sorkin just read the notes.

Lukas Foss' "Round a Common Center" (1980), for string quartet, piano and voice, is a routine puree of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, with a dash of Cageian tricks. It does, however, have a weird, intriguing coda that winds downs like a warped record on a gradually slowing turntable.

In his lovely "Iridescent Crystals," for four percussionists and electronics, Pease layers relatively simple

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lines for assorted small percussion into complex yet limpid conglomerates of sound, which function something like principal themes.

Their identities are as wedded to the timbre of their instrumentation as to their rhythms. So one doesn't remember the rhythm of the opening "theme," but rather the way it rises gradually in wood percussion — temple blocks, castanets, claves — like a yardful of crickets warming to their song on a hot July night.

Pease convincingly develops many such cells of material, based on everything from jangling xylophones to the ghostly sound of crystal water glasses stroked with violin bows, and dovetails them gracefully. Musical tension and relaxation arise from Pease's crafty thickening and thinning of the textures, and he frames the sheer sonic beauty of the piece in an elegantly simple overall structure.

Snopek's 12 "Desert Songs," settings of short, hallucinatory texts by Paul Spencer, are marvels of declamation, economy, invention and musical daring. No two of these gems are alike. Each is full of surprises and crazy little effects — whispers, loopy glissandos, clapping, bursts of laughter — that are integral rather than gratuitous. They feature a fascinating, ever-changing interplay of accent, phrase, meter, rhythm and text.

Snopek was brilliant at the piano and in the odd voice parts for the pianist that pop in and out of the piece, and soprano Marlee Sabo sent Snopek's tricky ornaments shooting through the hall like skyrocketers.

The minifestival concludes with a concert in the UWM Union Gallery at 8 p.m. Tuesday. A different set of Milwaukee composers will be on the bill.