

Multiple personality

Snopek as accomplished in classical music as he is in rock

"What's a Snopek?"

Merv Griffin might not have realized just how wise his question actually was when Jay Leno showed up for an appearance on the "Merv Griffin Show" some years back wearing a Snopek T-shirt.

But ask any musically attuned Milwaukeean the same and you'll get a memorable answer of some kind or another. Here's one: Eternally young at 43 and defying labels just as assiduously as he did 20 years ago, Waukesha-born Sigmund Snopek III is the most fearlessly innovative, dazzlingly creative musical mind that this region has ever produced.

Most people know Snopek as master of the 50 or so keyboards that dominate his small apartment on the east side of Milwaukee. Over the years — in some, to the tune of more than 300 gigs annually — Snopek has brought them alive in service of the inventive, chameleonic, highly entertaining brand of rock that has firmly established his fame in that competitive arena.

Kevin Stalheim's Present Music will present a Snopek premiere with its performance of his "Love Poems of the Woman D'Este," sung by soprano Leslie Fitzwater, at Present Music's Valentine's Day concert Saturday at 8 p.m. in the Milwaukee Art Museum. The concert also includes John Harbison's "Mirabai Songs," Michael Torke's "Licking for Love" and "Dead Elvis" by Michael Daugherty.

Back to Snopek. On the popular front there's a sizable cache of music stemming from his first band, The Bloomsbury People, his highly acclaimed four-man combo Snopek, and his many years as a solo performer.

But who else could claim as well a long list of wildly varied accomplishments in the classical medium that now boasts more than 100 works? These include such eye-opening newsmakers as:

■ The premiere of Snopek's first two symphonies, "Orange-Blue" (1971, written when Snopek was 19 and featuring the combination of light and sound) and "The Talking Symphony" (1975), both massive efforts, by none other than the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. He has written others since — an hour-long jazz symphony for the City of Waukesha in 1984 called "The Five Points"; "Avenue Fanfare" in 1991, a jaunty four-minute excursion to which Snopek fondly refers by its informal title of "Baby Symphony"; and "Festival Worlds" for Summerfest in 1992, for 15 musicians including strings, woodwinds, and rock band. "The Talking Symphony" was actually Snopek's senior thesis at the University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee, and was played by the MSO on its (now defunct) free Vibrations Unlimited series for young adults. Scored for orchestra, rock band, six actors and electric tape and based on the theme of sensory overload amid a communications breakdown, the intricate hour-long work was led by MSO associate conductor Ed Mumm on a single rehearsal.

A sample of expressive markings in the fearsomely challenging but sturdily constructed score gives some idea of the dramatic intensity and intrinsic musical values Snopek hoped to convey: "Build to Anger and Deliriousness and Keep the Rhythm Vital," he writes in one place, and in another, "Subdued but Alive" (in the latter spot, Snopek recalled recently in characteristic good humor, some of the MSO players had pencilled into their parts "... but nearing death").

Reactions to the premiere ranged from grudging admiration — "entertaining, in a provoking sort of way," one critic judged — to open skepticism from some members of the orchestra. As it happened, the latter did not escape notice by the audience, whose outcries prompted a public apology from the Players' Council a few weeks later.

■ A 55-section, four-hour rock cantata, or "musical novel," entitled "Trinity Seize, Seas, Sees" which Snopek once described as "the story of the struggle to be free and creative." Involving dancers, actors and mimes, it premiered in the Convention Center at Artfest '74 — although subsequent performances were moved outside because of the high sound level — and concerned the saga of a man snatched from a wedding in Waukesha by aliens and spirited to a tightly controlled planet. The protagonist then leads an escape that results in a war that is won by the freed spirits.



Playing music for love: Members of the Present Music ensemble. Director Kevin Stalheim is front and center.

Music

By Nancy Raabe

PRESENT MUSIC. 8 p.m. Saturday. Milwaukee Art Museum, 750 N. Lincoln Memorial Drive. Tickets are \$10 to \$17, \$6 for children and students with ID. Museum galleries will be open to all concert ticket-holders at 6:30 p.m.

Two years later the work was recast as a rock musical, "Return of the Spirit," commissioned by the Milwaukee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission for \$10,000. The plot was set on a distant planet in the year 3976 but put into motion in Milwaukee with an intergalactic kidnapping exactly two millennia earlier.

On a more modest scale, there is an ample quotient of chamber music. One that happened to be close at hand on a recent evening in Snopek's apartment was the string quartet "Silver Wire and Miniature Fugue." Dedicated to Snopek's mentor at UWM, Wisconsin Distinguished Professor John Downey, the piece has a four-voice fugue at the end based on "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," a piece Snopek says Downey is fond of using in his analysis classes to illustrate A-B-A form.

Snopek fans should be happy to hear that the quartet is one of several of the composer's works that will be released over the next few years on the Hamburg-based "Music Is Intelligence" label. The release schedule aims for one each month, with imminent additions to the catalogue to concentrate on his violin music and flute music.

In "Love Poems of the Woman D'Este," Snopek has set five succinct, evocative texts by the composer's longtime friend, San Francisco-based poet Cynthia D'Este, in a language that he characterizes as "tonal but evocative."

"They're very singable," he explained. "I'm a firm believer that if you write vocal music, you should be able to sing it."

In terms of their chronology, the songs have an interesting history. Snopek wrote the first four measures in 1983, but then waited 10 years and finished the rest in one month during 1991. Why? "I toured the world with the Violent Femmes," he shrugged. "I was busy."

The cycle is actually the second of three that Snopek has geared to form a trilogy of sorts. The first set is "The Desert Songs," written in 1978 on texts by Snopek's good

PM's fund-raising effort continues

In theory, the cancellation of the first of Present Music's two Turkish excursions in 1994, initiated by composer and Turkish native Kamran Ince, came as a disappointment to director Kevin Stalheim. A planned two-week residency at the Fourth International New Music Festival in Ankara from Feb. 20 to March 5 had to be dashed, he said, because of political instability.

Actually, though, Stalheim is more than just a little relieved.

"We would have had to do five different concerts in two weeks," he said. "That would have been almost impossible, in terms of how much we're doing now. Hopefully next year we can go, though."

Present Music is still scheduled to visit Turkey between May 21 and June 3 for the 1994 Modern Muzik Festivali in Istanbul. The climax of the trip will be an appearance at Istanbul's Cemal Resit Rey Concert Hall May 31.

The Ankara cancellation may have lifted a weight momentarily from Stalheim's shoulders in relieving his workload, but it hasn't eased what has come to be an ever-present concern about the ensemble's financial stability.

The ambitious \$275,000 Present Music Future campaign, launched this past fall, has met with some success, Stalheim said. But there's still a long way to go.

"We went through two rough years," he confessed. "This has been a much easier year than the last two in that we've gotten paid. But I'm still worried."

"The campaign is too young, which is the positive way to look at it. Definitely we've had some success, but it takes so much time. We've raised \$100,000 now. I know that sounds good, but \$40,000 of that is from the Milwaukee Foundation, which gave us a great grant, and \$30,000 is in three-year pledges from the board and committee. Some of our biggest hopes have already committed. So it'll be tough to get up to the \$275,000."

Stalheim said the group is grateful to the Marquette Electronics Foundation for providing \$5,000 concert sponsorships three years running. However, PM manager Dan Petry hasn't been able to turn up another concert sponsor.

"If every concert had one sponsor," Stalheim said, "it would be an incredible turnaround in what we do."

—Nancy Raabe

friend, the late poet Paul Spencer. The third component is "Pale Sun," for which sketches are completed, and will be premiered by soprano Marlee Sabo and Stephen Colburn's Milwaukee Chamber Orchestra — by which, incidentally, "Love Songs" was originally commissioned until the MCO hit financial troubles last spring and had to back out of the arrangement.

Other ambitious projects in progress include a three-act opera to be called "Irish," commissioned by the Irish Fest Theater. (Snopek is half Irish, half Polish.) "When you see it, you'll understand Ireland," he promised. The first act is based on Irish myths and history, the second on the book "The Famine Boat" — "of course, there wasn't a potato famine at all," he noted. "They were starved by England" — and the third act on modern Ireland.

Snopek is also collaborating with D'Este on an oratorio called "The Earth and Universe Symphony" dedicated to the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus' late founder and director Margaret Hawkins. Snopek developed a deep admiration for Hawkins back in Hawkins' Pewaukee High School days, after he heard her lead her acclaimed high school choir in a performance of Barney Childs' challenging "Fragments for Choir."

But who would perform the oratorio?

"The Symphony Chorus, I hope," Snopek said. "I'd like someone to commission it, actually. I think she deserves to have a great work written for her."