

Portugal brings out Snopek's composer side

By TOM STRINI

Journal Sentinel music critic

Most people know Sigmund Snopek as the keyboard player in rock bands, including the Violent Femmes, and one of Milwaukee's leading barroom pianists-about-town.

But Snopek has another side, one he occasionally reveals even in bar gigs or at his Summerfest and Irish Fest runs: He is a rigorously trained and active composer in the Western high-art tradition.

He will show that side in full tonight, in a self-produced concert at the Miramar Theatre. Snopek, singers Annie Denison, Leslie Fitzwater, Kelly Fadeski and Christine (Thomas) O'Mealy, clarinetist Christopher Zello, flutist Marie Sander and pianist Don Stimpert will perform.

The centerpiece will be four song cycles, one for each singer, on texts by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa grew up partly in Durban, South Africa, where he learned English and French. Some of his poetry is in English.

"I got turned on to Pessoa when we were in Portugal," Snopek said. "I went three times with the Violent Femmes and had a chance to absorb the culture."

Pessoa (1888-1935) was an eccentric. He wrote under his own name, four major pseudonyms and at least 68 secondary ones. He created elaborate personae and distinct literary styles for many of them. Snopek said Pessoa was known to change residence and change his wardrobe and habits to live more fully within the characters he invented.

Snopek had particular singers in mind when he composed each cycle. Denison, for example, is a jazz singer by trade, and Snopek's writing reflects that. (She's doing her own show with the Paul Spencer Band on Friday at the Sharon Lynne Wilson Center in Brookfield; call (262) 781-9520 for information.)

"I met Annie in the rock world, but she's a jazz singer who also sings classical," Snopek said. "She sang the fugue in the James Joyce 'Ulysses' I did at Irish Fest. The songs for her are a little poppier and a little jazzier."

"I've worked with Sigmund pushing 20 years, now," Denison said in a separate interview. "Musicians just love doing his work. He ends up getting people for nothing, people who usually charge a lot of money. This song cycle is his gift to me, for working on his 'Baseball' CD. It's a joy to take a new work and be the first to interpret it — it's an honor."



Snopek

IF YOU GO

What: New music by Sigmund Snopek

Where: Miramar Theatre, 2844 N. Oakland Ave.

When: 7 tonight

Tickets: \$10, Miramar box office, (414) 967-0302



Denison

Sander, the flutist, also has worked with Snopek often, on her own and as a member of Present Music. She advised him on the composition of a solo work, "Breakfast in Africa," premiered it a couple of years ago and will play it again tonight. Sander followed Denison in considering Snopek concerts labors of love.

"He pays people when he can," she said, laughing, adding that Snopek is fun to work with. "Sigmund likes to doodle on flute, himself. Have you ever heard him play? It's wild."

Snopek wrote the first of the upcoming cycles for Leslie Fitzwater, for a cabaret show at the Skylight Opera Bar three years ago. It is the most conventional in its relation to classical art song. The songs for Fadeski,

he said, have a tinge of Broadway about them. He describes the cycle that O'Mealy will sing as spare and minimal. The composer and Stimpert will play selections from Snopek's new, self-produced "Jade" solo piano CD. These descriptive miniatures might be mistaken for Satie. (You can buy it at www.sigmund-snopek.com.)

"I write this kind of music all the time," Snopek said, "but there's not always a venue for it. I don't want it to just sit around. I want the tree to fall in the forest, so someone can hear it."

Besides, it's more fun to organize a concert than not. When the music stops tonight, performers and audience will mingle over a spread catered by Chef Pat.

"Chef Pat was caterer to the stars at Summerfest," Snopek said. "There will be Portuguese food for everyone, until it runs out."