

Foss directs Symphony in unusual treat

By Lawrence B. Johnson

The Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, striding through the most distinguished season in its 23-year history, offered an unusual mix to treat its patrons Friday night in Uihlein Hall.

First out of the hat came Charles Wuorinen's "The Magic Art," a wonderfully affectionate pastiche of works by the 17th century English master Henry Purcell.

Music

In concept reminiscent of Stravinsky's "Pulcinella," which redresses pieces by several baroque composers in modern orchestra raiment, Wuorinen's "Magic Art" (1977) eloquently, brightly and above all warmly recaptures the spirit of Purcell by distinctively 20th century means.

From the complete work running about 80 minutes, Music Director Lukas Foss has chosen three movements — Fanfare, Chaconne and Finale — that splendidly summarize the wizardry of Purcell and Wuorinen alike.

The Chaconne alone would almost be worth the price of admission when the program is repeated at 8:30 p.m. Saturday and 7:30 p.m. Sunday. In Foss' articulate and sensitive care, the movement unfolded in a leisurely panorama of zesty counterpoint, piquant harmonies and a marvelous variety of instrumental color.

Even in a season that has produced an almost endless exhibition of beautiful playing, the Milwaukee Symphony scarcely has delivered anything with greater perfection or feeling than it brought to this old music made new.

The great master of modern England, Benjamin Britten, was represented with almost as satisfying result when tenor Lee Henning joined the orchestra's principal French horn player, Paul Tervelt, in the Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings.

Where Tervelt's solo work was concerned, this exquisite and prodigiously difficult music could not have wrought more sweetly or with greater refinement. Henning, still a young singer, brought an earnest quality of expression to bear at every turn but sometimes needed a bit more brass in his voice to match the horn.

Likewise, the orchestra strings not only produced much radiant sound, but showed a heads-up discipline, the absence of which has sometimes undermined other performances. However, Foss' consistently lyrical interpretation might have made some concessions in energy, sheer volume, to the singer's marginal strength.

A birthday tribute to Abraham Lincoln crowned the concert as Joyce Dreyfus offered a dignified, if not terribly dramatic, narration of Copland's "Lincoln Portrait." Here again, Foss directed an orchestral performance of concentrated power and solid ensemble.