

French horn player Ruske dances through notes and steps

By TOM STRINI
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The french horn is hard enough to play under the best conditions — comfortably seated with the score open on the stand. At his Artist Series recital Tuesday evening at the Pabst Theater, Eric Ruske not only played flawlessly and sensitively, he also played everything from memory, he stood and he danced.

That's right, *danced*. While playing the horn.

It's true that choreographer Kalya Yannatos assigned more difficult maneuvers to herself, but in the 25-minute course of James Yannatos' "Simultaneous Contrasts," Ruske had to turn, crouch, stalk, extend and contract, circle his partner, strike all manner of poses and

generally comport himself like a dancer.

The lithe, 26-year-old musician — clad in a pale orange shorts outfit over blue tights — moved with panache and somehow managed to produce a golden tone, clear phrasing, and the composer's meandering, improvisatory, endless melodies (the notes alone represent prodigious feats of memory and stamina).

This 1987 piece, a Ruske commission, is too diffuse musically and too tame and affected choreographically to really work. But its concept is so cheeky and peculiar, and Ruske and Kalya Yannatos performed it with such conviction, that it took on a certain seeing-is-believing fascination. "Simultaneous Contrasts" was definitely worth seeing

once, because, well, horn players don't dance.

The more stationary and conventional half of the program encompassed Schumann's lyrical Adagio and Allegro in A-flat, Opus 70; Beethoven's cheery Sonata in F, Opus 17; four sentimental pieces from Gliere's Opus 35; and Gilbert Vinter's robust "Hunter's Moon." Pianist Stefanie Jacob accompanied and graced the proceedings with a refined touch and beautiful sound.

Ruske was masterful throughout. Intonation never wavered, and neither did his warm, substantial tone — he can float the loveliest, most delicate pianissimo you'll ever hear come out of a horn.

Not a moment of this concert

was devoted to loud, fast, flashy brass playing. The real benchmark of Ruske's art is not technique, but phrasing. His approach was more that of the song recitalist, maybe even the song stylist. The focus was on how notes fit together, how they swell and recede, how they relate to speech and emotion. Ruske's naturalness, the apparent artlessness and his cunning use of understatement made me think of Sinatra at his best.

This fellow can play, and he has marvelous musical instincts. In 10 years, maybe five, people will be calling Eric Ruske the world's greatest hornist — even if he does nothing but stand still and play.