

Classical Candor

By John J. Puccio

American composer Mark Abel (b. 1948), who describes his work as "a post-modern synthesis of classical and rock," is in good company when he gives classical-pop fusion a try in *The Dream Gallery: Seven California Portraits*.

... Some of the songs are straightforward, some of them ironic, some satirically biting. Are they fair to the state? No, and I doubt that Abel meant them to be fair; they're as much personal, intellectual reactions as those of any novelist or poet. Abel is making a few perceptive insights here and doesn't try to pass them off as absolute examples of everybody in the state. Yet, when you listen to the texts of the songs, you recognize the types of people involved, and, yes, you probably know at least a few of them, they're so universal.

Gallery begins with "Helen" from Los Angeles, sung by Mary Jaeb. It's a grim note of despair, disillusion, and loneliness about a woman caught in the upward spiral of the American dream until it all comes tumbling down -- the years of marriage, the child, the husband who finds a younger companion. Still, thinks Helen, there is always a new day. Shades of *Gone with the Wind*, yet, sadly, without Scarlett's firm resolve actually to do something to improve her situation.

"Todd" from Taft, sung by David Marshman, continues the reproachful trend as he describes a town built on hope, a town now derelict, a ghost of its former self, ravaged by exploiters. Then there's "Naomi" from Berkeley, sung by Janelle DeStefano. Naomi is a smug Berkeleyite who looks down on those without her knowing understanding of the world, those who just don't get it, yet she is a woman who clearly feels something may be just as wrong with her as with the people she faults. Abel writes of people who either lack confidence or have it stripped from them.

And so it goes, the singing uniformly informed, soaring, penetrating, affecting as the situation demands. The orchestral support tries to remain unobtrusive, although it does occasionally seem to overpower the narrative. Most of the sentiments are easy enough to identify with, especially "Carol" of San Diego (Delaney Gibson), a go-getter with an empty life filled to the brim with the nothingness she so cherishes. Empty people, empty lives, empty dreams. The series ends with one person, "Adam" of Arcata (Tom Zohar), who chooses probably to leave the state for lands unknown. Anywhere but what he sees as a wasteland.

Let's agree these are not flattering pictures of Californians, and the easy knock against them is to say that anybody can condemn, criticize, and denounce. Yet inherent in all the bitter sarcasm are pointers to happiness. Recognizing a problem, after all, is the first step toward solving it.

Anyway, as I was saying, the singing and ensemble work are spot on, and the content is readily accessible.