

San Diego Troubadour

By Frank Kocher

Mark Abel is a composer who describes his approach to *The Dream Gallery: Seven California Portraits* as "postmodernist art song." It's dense, avant garde material that requires the listener's full attention for 70 minutes. He's mixing classical orchestrations, progressive rock chops, classically trained singers, and plenty of musical theatre exposition-song touches, all delivering smartly written, irony-laced essays about social issues

The pieces are named after the first-person character singing, who each represent a California city or county. The first one is Helen, from L.A., and to some very interesting and dynamic orchestral backing, she relates her transformation from naive young girl through phases as blissed newlywed, betrayed wife, to embittered divorcee. This is the most effective of Abel's set pieces here; soloist Mary Jaeb has a knockout voice and gaps in the narrative allow the orchestration to make its own statement with a quiet flute passage, a cello-fueled buildup, and mood changes that match up well with the story. ...

Abel isn't far off in calling *The Dream Gallery* postmodernist art songs. They are closest to performance art, in 10-minute snippets. Some grab attention, some don't, but it is clever and different.