

Pictures on Silence

By Don Clark

Mark Abel melds his (life) experience ... into songs that are sophisticated, accessible, original and tuneful. ... Frequently tonally ambiguous and contemporary in sound, they are well crafted, emotionally complex and engaging lyric songs in the truest sense of the form.

The Dark-Eyed Chameleon is the most substantial and most emotionally affecting of the three song cycles on "Terrain of the Heart." The nearly half-hour cycle tells the tale of the composer's painful breakup of a long-term relationship. Hints of past tragedy and loss, misunderstandings, longing, realizing the inevitable ("underneath us the ground is always shifting, unstable like our California") and the final break ("the fatal blow is struck by telephone") permeate Abel's lyrics. Very theatrical in nature, *Chameleon* could be envisioned as a one-actor play, but Abel's accompanying music, alternatively wistful, agonized and even confused, propels the story forward as much as the lyrics. Soprano Jamie Chamberlin (and) pianist Victoria Kirsch totally understand and are committed to the work. Chamberlin negotiates the many chromatic leaps and rapid changes of emotion and texture. Kirsch is a sensitive yet propulsive accompanist and a full partner in telling the story.

For the *Five Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, soprano Ariel Pisturino takes over the vocal duties. Pisturino is gifted with a big, but clear and slightly bright voice that perfectly suits the darkly expressive poetry. Hers is a voice tailor-made for art song. Of the three cycles, *Five Poems* is the most "classical" influenced, more adventurous and flexible in tempi and dynamics, befitting the more hauntingly symbolic nature of the lyrics. "In this town the last house stands" is shaded and ultimately enigmatic, the vocal lines lyrical but unsettled at the same time. "All of you undisturbed cities" is punctuated with relentless ostinati over which Pisturino weaves the jagged melodic line, laced with impending doom. In the remaining songs, ... Abel's stark and expressionistic music works in tandem with the often mysterious poetry to deliver a most satisfying yet challenging musical experience. *Five Poems* is certainly a fine addition to the song repertoire and worth repeated hearings in recordings and in recitals or concerts.

Chamberlin returns with her lighter voice ... in the final four *Rainbow Songs*. More light-hearted and fanciful than the other cycles, *Rainbow* could be dismissed ... as nothing new but for the colorful and atmospheric "La Sonnambula," depicting a woman wandering through desolate streets looking for her lover, but doomed to never find him. "La Sonnambula" is a touch more sophisticated than many of the other songs, growing in drama, dynamics and lyrical intensity from a shadowy figure in the piano. To my ears, it is the single most effective song on the disc.

Abel's music in each of the cycles is highly chromatic and linear, the incessant forward motion showing the formidable influences of the composer's rock music roots. While appropriate to the lyrics, which, with the exception of the Rilke songs, are also rock influenced and linear in nature, the chromatic and declamatory sound world (suggests it is) probably best to get into this music by listening to one cycle at a time. ... Put all that aside, and listen to some fine, easily approachable and frequently satisfying songs.