

aged, grizzled cowboy with a voice that nearly reaches the bottom of the keyboard.

All in all, this disk offers up a wonderful kaleidoscope of styles that also serves as an important reminder that the combination of a well founded technique with boundless musical imagination makes for an unbeatable combination.

and he'll be mine—love songs by gay american composers. Dennis Tobenski, tenor; Marc Peloquin, piano. (Perfect Enemy Records; 53:30)

Chester Biscardi: *Modern Love Songs*: "What a Coincidence," "I Wouldn't Know About That," "Someone New," "Now You See It, Now You Don't," "At Any Given Moment." David Del Tredici: "Here" (*Gay Life*). Zachary Wadsworth: *Three Lullabies*: "Rockaby, Lullaby," "You spotted snake . . ." "Under the silver moon." Darien Shulman: *Three Poems of Thomas Moore*: "If Thou'lt Be Mine," "An Argument," "Come Rest in This Bosom." Dennis Tobenski: *And He'll Be Mine*: "Braw, Braw Lads o' Galla Water," "Craigieburn Wood," "Him That's Far Away," "Lament," "Bonie Dundee," "The Gallant Weaver," "John Anderson, My Jo."

This is a deeply compelling collection of superbly crafted songs that all happen to have been written by gay composers. In this day and age, that might seem like a fairly unremarkable fact hardly worth mentioning, let alone trumpeting as the headline on the cover of a CD. Then again, there continue to be reversals in the ongoing struggle for LGBT equality, and perhaps that is more than enough reason for recordings like this to be released. At any rate, there is no ques-

tion whatsoever about the excellence of these songs or about the performances which they receive. Tenor Dennis Tobenski is a skillful and sensitive singer who shapes phrases and renders text with expert care. The voice itself is quite attractive if occasionally prone to slight nasality. Pianist Marc Peloquin plays flawlessly; his superb work makes an immeasurable contribution to the beauty of these performances.

Without a doubt the finest songs in this collection are the five *Modern Love Songs* by Chester Biscardi, composed between 1997 and 2002 to texts by William Zinsser. Composer and writer first met during jury duty, of all things, and their conversations during their break time eventually revealed their mutual love for and interest in popular song. That was when they decided that they would collaborate, and the results were spectacularly successful as well as a bit surprising. Zinsser, who died in 2015, was a highly acclaimed journalist and writer of nonfiction who is probably best remembered as the author of *On Writing Well*, an indispensable guide for several generations of writers, would-be and otherwise. He may not have spent much of his public professional life writing song lyrics, but he did plenty of such work in his college days, and he wrote about music with discernment and passion. (Of the 18 nonfiction books he authored, his personal favorite was *The Great American Songwriters and Their Songs*, as fine a book on the topic as any ever written.) He was also an able and enthusiastic jazz pianist who only began performing in public when he was in his 60s. And his collaboration with Biscardi may have been at least part of the inspiration for his 2002 musical revue *What's the Point?*, for which he crafted both lyrics and music.

Biscardi and Zinsser decided from the start that they wanted the songs they were going to write to fall somewhere between the worlds of art songs and cabaret songs, and that is precisely what they created. They fall easily upon the ear and are entirely accessible and comfortable, but there is a level of complexity and craftsmanship that elevates them beyond the realm of popular song. Biscardi makes special note of the asymmetrical construction of the lyrics and the sophisticated use of unconventional rhyme that seem to have inspired the composer to produce some of the most arresting music of his career. The opening song, "What a Coincidence," is probably the most conventional of the five, but it's still a masterful creation that proves the power of understatement when it's done just right. "I Wouldn't Know About That" explores how real life love does not always align with the kind of love fancifully described or depicted in poetry and film. It's a complicated text but Biscardi's setting is breathtaking for its natural ease, and it also manages to soften the sarcastic edge of the text, ever so slightly. "Someone New" is a breathtaking depiction of how someone can find himself utterly transformed in the act of falling in love. "He chased away the other me," says the singer, "and brought in someone new." Beneath the languid surface of the song is a quietly churning passion generated by Biscardi's brilliant use of harmonic tension. It's nothing less than a masterpiece. "Now You See It, Now You Don't" finds the singer lightheartedly trying to come to terms with emotional abandonment, but we can sense the real pain behind the brave facade. The set ends in stunning fashion with "At Any Given Moment," in which the lyrics suggest that we discard the question "How

do I love thee?" in favor of "When do I love thee?" The answer to that question is a radiant outpouring of passion and devotion: "At any given moment . . . of any given hour . . . of any given day . . . you are somewhere in my heart." Those are words of breathtaking beauty even apart from Biscardi's gorgeous musical setting of them. It is safe to say that in the last half century, no more beautiful love song has been composed than this.

The rest of this disk also offers up compelling riches. The most familiar of the remaining composers will be David Del Tredici, whose many groundbreaking works include *Final Alice*, that famous piece that found soprano Barbara Hendricks singing into a megaphone. "Here" is from his work *Gay Life* and features just the kind of bracing, impactful music we have come to expect from this maverick. Zachary Wadsworth's exquisite *Three Lullabies* feature texts by Josiah Gilbert Holland, William Shakespeare, and Lord Alfred Tennyson. At a glance, they would seem to be the most "off-topic" of anything on this recording, but Tobenski's liner notes give them proper context. Beyond the more conventional picture of a parent lulling a child to sleep, Tobenski writes that "below this simple and tender surface lies a more complicated emotional landscape, steeped in parents' anxiety about the safety of their child in a dangerous world." That frames these lullabies in a very different light and makes them an essential element in this collection. Darien Schulman's *Three Poems of Thomas Moore* are beautiful as well, and the tenor scales their challenging melodic lines with impressive ease. It's no surprise to read that Tobenski and Peloquin commissioned these works; they suit them perfectly. Tobenski's

own contribution to the collection is the title work, which features his setting of eight different poems by Robert Burns. He has taken texts originally conceived to be sung by a woman expressing love for a man, and in doing so has created what in his mind was and remains "a gay song cycle." On the other hand, Tobenski says that the folk song tradition allows for all kinds of crossover between genders and he says he would welcome anybody of any gender or orientation to perform these songs. Expertly crafted, yet true to the folk tradition, they yield some of the most poignant moments in this entire collection.

Mark Abel: *Home is a Harbor- Opera in Three Acts. The Palm Trees Are Restless—Five Poems of Kate Gale.*

Jamie Chamberlin, Ariel Pisturino, Hila Plitmann, soprano; Janelle DeStefano, mezzo soprano; Jon Lee Keenan, tenor; Babatund Akinboboye, E. Scott Levin, baritone; Carver Cossey, bass; Tali Tadmor, piano; Benjamn Makino, conductor; La Brea Sinfonietta. (Delos DE 3495; 77:43, 47:03)

Home is a Harbor. The Palm Trees Are Restless: "The Storm Drain," "Los Angeles," "Crater Light," "Shura," "The Great Divorce."

For Verdi, it was a promising but raw work called *Oberto*. For his German rival Wagner, it was the intriguing if nearly incoherent *Die Feen*. For Puccini, it was the rough and only fitfully inspired *Le villi*. These were the first operas of three of history's greatest operatic geniuses, and they were a far cry from the assured masterworks that these composers would eventually go on to create within a few years time. It underscores just how challenging it

has been for even these great composers to master the genre of opera, which in many ways is the most extravagant and complex of all art forms.

This is good to keep in mind in assessing the first opera of Mark Abel, a skilled and assured composer of songs. In the liner notes for this release, Delos executive Carol Rosenberger waxes rhapsodic about what Abel has been able to do on the larger canvas of opera. It's hard to imagine that she is referring to *Home Is a Harbor*, an intermittently interesting but deeply flawed work that irritates more than engrosses. As is the case with so many new operas, its fatal flaw is its amateurish libretto by Abel himself. The basic storyline is simply too complicated to be an effective opera libretto. It's a coming of age story for two sisters who venture out from the relative safety and comfort of their small hometown to seek success in two different cities. By the time we're done, we've touched on such issues as homelessness, the war in Afghanistan, the financial crisis, graft in the art world, and the angst and alienation of life in modern America. Abel seems to have made the mistaken assumption that the more expansive framework of an opera must be filled from corner to corner with a plethora of different ideas and themes. Anyone deeply versed in how great operas are constructed will tell you that this is a recipe for artistic disaster. Beyond the issues with the storyline itself, much of the actual text lacks the emotional weight that cries out to be sung. Perhaps it would work better as a Hallmark Channel TV movie, but it simply fails to take wing as an opera libretto. Abel's score is a bit better than its libretto, but it, too, is rife with problems. It has a lurching, ill-at-ease quality, especially when Abel falls into a tedious pattern of