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By Micaele Sparacino

This superb recording of Mark Abel's composition *The Dream Gallery* has already received the Award of Excellence (for lyrics) and the Award of Merit (for originality and creativity) presented by Global Music Awards (GMA). *Gallery*, a 70-minute orchestral song cycle, recalls the famous Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky, as it is in many ways a modern version of his *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

First of all, Mr. Abel, like his Russian predecessor, has found a new and original musical language in which to write, that he describes as a fusion of classical music with contemporary rock. Secondly, the song cycle is composed like a gallery of very colorfully painted portraits and pictures.

These psychologically penetrating songs capture the state of mind of seven present-day Californians whom he calls Helen, Todd, Naomi, Carol, Lonnie, Luz and Adam. He details these characters most perceptively in an atmosphere of what might be described as the remains of the "California Dream," coloring them with elements of both satire and compassion. He plants these archetypal characters in various locales throughout the state, and it must be said that Mr. Abel has an uncanny knack for musically capturing the atmospheres of these various topographies and terrains.

Mr. Abel has composed his own lyrics, which truly give a strong unity of vision to his composition. The texts meld perfectly with the music, and they convey a wide range of issues and behavior patterns -- which, in his own words, range from "big-city swagger, elitist conceits and the struggle of immigrants to betrayal, racial scapegoating and environmental devastation."

This is a major new American song cycle I believe it is a recording you will enjoy and want to own, and if you have ever lived in California for any length of time, as I did in the 1980s, the music will take you there once again.

The music does indeed have the weight and sophistication of "classical music," but I do not hear the rock influence in any strong way. ... All to the better for my tastes. The cycle employs the gamut of classical voices -- soprano, mezzo, contralto, tenor, baritone, and bass (sorry, no countertenor) -- and all of the singers perform most admirably, as does the La Brea Sinfonietta under the fine direction of Maestra Sharon Lavery.

I enjoyed (*Gallery*) much more than I expected to. I found it profound and compelling in many ways, and I was enticed to multiple listenings. I have placed it on the shelf next to my recordings of Leonard Bernstein, Elvis Costello and Kurt Weill.