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By James Manheim

Part of the appeal of this song cycle is the collision between the small ensemble of classical instruments and the thoroughly contemporary language. Abel's seven songs are portraits of characteristic individuals in seven California communities, ... and what makes them persuasive is the depth of characterization in the texts (which are Abel's own), not the novelty.

Abel deploys a different soloist, matched to the material, in each song; bass Carver Cossey as Lonnie, the disillusioned African-American migrant from Louisiana to Richmond, is a particular standout, as is Abel's setting here, incorporating spoken exclamations of disgust and knowing cynicism. But all the singers respond well to Abel's mixture of dramatic characterization and straightforward text declamation: he never pushes the words out of shape, and the texts included in the CD booklet are hardly necessary given the clear articulation of all seven soloists.

These acid yet humane portraits of California will be recognizable to anyone who has lived there, or really to any American. A bit like a West Coast William Bolcom, but not much like anything else out there, this is most highly recommended.