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Not only does California-based composer Mark Abel’s first opera deal with a journey of discovery, but his own unique path as a composer sets him apart as a highly individual voice in contemporary music. The 67-year-old Abel, who has written several acclaimed song cycles, as well as a just-released three-act opera, *Home Is a Harbor*, on the Delos label, began his career as a rock musician in the 1970s and early 80s before serving as the foreign news editor for the San Francisco Chronicle while honing his classical composition skills. In recent years, the completely self-taught composer has produced a number of noteworthy recorded works, among them *The Dream Gallery, Journey Long, Journey Far*, and *Terrain of the Heart*, in addition to his debut opera and newest song cycle, *The Palm Trees Are Restless*, settings of poems by Kate Gale. In a candid conversation with Fanfare’s Carla Maria Verdino-Sullwold, Abel discusses his development as a musician, his shaping influences, his musical tastes and goals.

*Though you had written song cycles before, Home Is a Harbor is your first opera. What brought you to the decision to write both the music and libretto for an opera?*

My story is an unusual one for a classical composer. I am self-taught. I began as a rock musician when I was in my 20s and 30s. Then I taught myself a great deal about classical music—mostly by listening and attending performances—while I was working as a journalist. But I am a latecomer to opera. I needed to find my legs as a composer first before I thought to attempt a full dramatic work. When I felt that I had become a pretty good writer of song cycles, then I felt I could bring to bear the tools I had to create an opera—something of a manageable length.

*And what prompted you to write your own libretto?*

I have been a lyric writer for some time; I wrote the texts for many of my song cycles, and I felt I had the literary skills to pull it off. For example, my cycle *The Dream Gallery* is a series of first-person musings by imaginary California characters. Then, too, writing English lyrics comes naturally to me from my days as a rock songwriter and as a journalist. I understand how phrases can sit effectively in varied musical backdrops. I wanted to write a conversational piece, not a literary one. My technique is to write the words as I am writing the music, so that the rhythms of both are organic. Writing both text and music this way gives me the freedom to change a line if it doesn’t work for the music.

*What about the dramatic structure and thematic inspiration for Home Is a Harbor? It is a compact 103 minutes but covers a very wide time frame and emotional landscape*.

I wanted to keep the opera compact, and I knew I wanted to write a coming of age story. For many years now I have been drawn to Morro Bay, California, which is one of the settings. It is an unspoiled place, off the beaten track, away from the pressures one finds in urban areas, so it seemed like a good backdrop for the part of the story that symbolizes what is left of normality in our country. Then, because I had lived for many years in New York City in my 20s and 30s, I was able to access those memories as well, and I used my experiences living in the San Diego area during the height of the financial crisis to set another one of the scenes in next-door Irvine, one of the epicenters of the collapse. Lastly, from my experiences in foreign news, I was able to portray the devastating effects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*Tell me a little about your scoring of the work for a modestly-sized ensemble and organ?*

I would have loved to have a full string section, of course, but that would have put the piece into another economic performance tier entirely. I love woodwinds and piano, but I also felt that there were moments that needed more volume and power. I decided to use the organ, which is a bit novel, and then I had to work it into the overall texture. It often doubles the bass and gives the bottom of the music a heavier feeling, letting the rest of the instrumentation sit on top.

*Did you have certain specific voices or voice qualities in mind when you wrote the opera?*

I am a bit of a maverick in terms of what kind of voices I like to have singing my music. I believe firmly that singers who perform in English should be able to make the words clear and comprehensible. If their vibrato is so pronounced that the audience doesn’t know what they are singing, then I feel this overwhelms the work and doesn’t suit my musical idiom—or anyone else’s, for that matter.

*How did you (and Delos) choose the singers and instrumentalists you used on the recording?*

I had worked with Jamie Chamberlin and Ariel Pisturino before on *Terrain of the Heart*, and with Janelle DeStefano and Carver Cossey on *The Dream Gallery*, so I knew what they could do. The two sopranos have timbres that are different enough for them to complement each other well as the twin sisters of *Home Is a Harbor*. One of the most exciting discoveries for me during the recording process was of baritone Babatunde Akinboboye, who will have, I hope, a bright future. He projects emotion so wonderfully without the heaviness of some baritone voices. As for the musicians, I knew conductor Ben Makino and cellist Tim Loo, and Tim helped us pull together some of the best young session players in Los Angeles.

*The two-disc set also includes The Palm Trees Are Restless, in which you set five poems by Kate Gale. How did that collaboration come about?*

I had read some of her poetry, and I liked it because it is so visceral. She strips away images for their own sake and writes about what is really going on. I took a much-needed break after writing the first act of *Home Is a Harbor* and chose the poems from her new book, *Echo Light*. I wrote the cycle in two weeks, which is record time for me. The recording of the cycle also came about serendipitously. I knew Tali Tadmor, the pianist, who is a friend of the soprano Hila Plitmann. Hila is very celebrated for her work in contemporary music, so I consider myself lucky that she was able to squeeze the recording into her calendar. We did it all in one session in Los Angeles with very little rehearsal. Because she works frequently with Tali, they have this telepathic thing going on.

*You now record for Delos, though your initial releases were self-produced. Why is it important to have a recording of a new work, and what do you think the future of contemporary classical recordings may be?*

This is a very difficult and dangerous period for classical music and all serious art. People’s attention spans are getting shorter; they are obsessed with their smart phones; some don’t even want a CD player or speakers in the house. Many aren’t willing to justify the time to sit and actually LISTEN to a piece of music. All this has a deleterious effect on the classical music world.

I wanted to have my opera make its debut on disc because I felt I could use the recording as a calling card, rather than knocking on doors and trying to sell a commission concept to an opera company. It was a gamble to realize the work sonically and let others decide if they liked it. But now it exists to speak for itself.

*Did you ever see yourself arriving at this point in your life and career when you were a struggling New York rock musician? Looking back, how do you see your personal and musical journey?*

I was born in a time period that put me smack into what in my opinion was the Golden Age of rock music—the mid-to-late 1960s and early 70s. I grew up having seen all the major groups of the 60s, and from 1970 to 1983 I played guitar and bass in several bands and began to write song lyrics. By the time I was in my mid-30s, I realized that my projects had not gotten enough breaks and I wasn’t going to make much of an impact in that field. I also felt rock was heading in a direction I didn’t like; it was becoming a corporate product, and I felt I was repeating myself as a writer. So, I began to go back to my love of classical music in the late 1970s and finally I walked away from pop.

I had had no formal composition training, so once I came back to the West Coast, I began to teach myself in my spare time by listening and attending live performances. Working for 21 years as a journalist, I was putting in a great many hours, but eventually through experimentation I arrived at the point where I felt I could finally put my compositions out in the world.

*And whom were you listening to? What composers shaped your tastes?*

Well, of course, I had listened to Mozart, Brahms, and Beethoven at my father’s knee, and I did immerse myself in the core repertoire, but I made the acquaintance of some neglected composers such as Szymanowski, Zemlinsky, Martin, and Schulhoff, who were creators of a high level. I have always been drawn to major 20th-century composers such as Janáček, Berg, Shostakovich, and to Strauss’s *Elektra* and *Salome*, which I consider masterpieces written at the peak of his progressiveness.

*What do you foresee as the next step in your own journey?*

Writing an opera and a song cycle are very different expressions for me. I have started work on another song cycle for piano, voice, and organ, setting my own texts. The songs will look back at several important episodes in my life which I have now put behind me.

*What impact do you hope your music will have on your listeners?*

I hope I can get my audience to latch onto the musical and emotional journey.