

Fanfare Magazine

By Colin Clarke and Maria Nockin

The five-song, half-hour cycle *The Dark-Eyed Chameleon* (words by the composer) is poignant, certainly, while also revealing Abel's natural setting of the English language. It all flows beautifully. Like Janáček's, Abel's music tends to mimic speech patterns, but his accompaniments combine elements of rock, jazz and 20th-century classical music. *Chameleon* looks back on the emotional pain of lost love, and the free rhythmic design of its first song, "The Burned Horizon," allows the beat to change with the text. Abel conveys the heady rush of the initial stages of a love affair powerfully ("I am reborn, my suffering transfigured"), just as he conveys the first doubts (the third song, "Premonition") to music that is more otherworldly than we have encountered so far, as if the protagonist is entering strange and unknown terrain.

Soprano Jamie Chamberlin has the perfect voice for this cycle, youthful yet somehow knowing beyond her years, aspects that pay off hugely in the profoundly affecting "Your Girl." The climax of the cycle is the end of the relationship (via telephone and a collection of platitudes) in the final song, "Cataclysm." Here the musical language extends towards Messiaen, ... and the piano thunders its description of heartbreak. Chamberlin's lack of vibrato describes the feeling of being swept out to sea as she learns to accept the inevitable. Abel tracks the sequence of post-breakup emotions tellingly ("Did I ever know you?" gives way to the realization that "I am no longer thinking of you").

Ariel Pisturino sings the *Five Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, (whose) idiomatic translations from the German are by Robert Bly. Particularly striking is Abel's simplicity of utterance, which seems to enhance the enigmatic nature of the poetry itself. Pisturino has a large, powerful voice which stands her in good stead here. The readings of Abel's songs are mightily persuasive, the composer's (and the singer's) admiration of the poet immediately audible. "The Last House" is not necessarily a home, just a marker on the path of life, which as Rilke reminds us, is a journey into the unknown. Rilke battled depression and his poetry is often marked by it, but most of these selections tend to be hopeful and Abel's music underlines that aspect. The colorations of Pisturino's low tones speak volumes about the many stops on the journey.

The insistent stabbing repetitions of "All of You Undisturbed Cities" are most effective before the poet's natural introspection (and Abel's musical reaction to this) return in the final two songs. "You Darkness, That I Come From" and "I Live My Life in Growing Orbits" are overpowering pieces that can make listeners sit back and think about their own life paths. The last line asks whether "I am a falcon, or a storm, or a great song." Here poet, composer, singer, and pianist collaborate in a great performance. Pisturino negotiates the song's sometimes wide leaps easily and confidently, just as she does in the vocalise section.

Finally, the disc features *Rainbow Songs*, to lyrics by the composer. Although not originally intended as a cycle, these four songs share sufficient links to work together to form a single entity. Three speak of relationships and the fourth reminds us of the fortitude that it takes to be a survivor. The first two songs extol the glories of nature but by the end of the second, "Breezes Blow and Eagles Fly," we know the couple will part on good terms but their time together is at an end. Inspired by the final sequence of

Michelangelo Antonioni's film *L'Eclisse*, the next song, "La Sonnambula," opens with only the barest of pianistic textures, a succession of spare gestures over which the soprano spins a desolate line (as she) walks along through the night in a silent city expecting to meet the lover who waits for her. Chamberlin describes the scene with the radiance of her high notes. It is arguably the most effective song on the whole disc: Certainly one gets the impression that everything has come together here and the composer's imagination is flying free. The music slowly gels in a mode of expression that is by now heard as characteristic of this composer, appealing sonically yet still expressive.

In the final song, "The Guest" is one's own spirit, a part of each of us that provides the strength to endure more than we ever thought possible. The song speaks of hope, ably conveyed by Chamberlin's effortless soprano. She sings with plaintive tones (of being) alone. Then, with all the luster of her full voice, proclaims that she will survive.