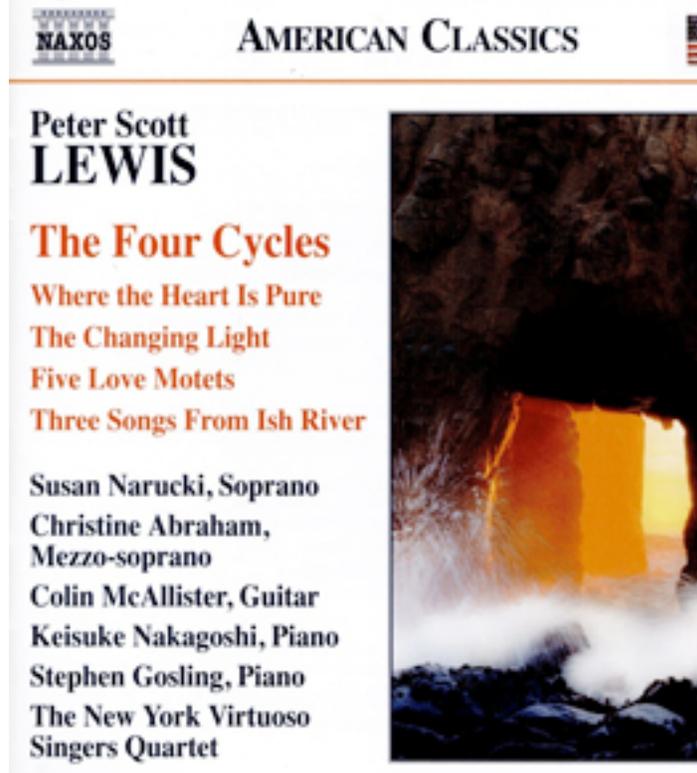


LEWIS: "The Four Cycles"

CD Narucki, Abraham; The New York Virtuoso Singers Quartet; McAllister (guitar), Nakagoshi (piano), Gosling (piano), Lewis. English texts. Naxos 8.559815



THE EPONYMOUS OPENING SONG of Peter Scott Lewis's *Where the Heart is Pure*, the eminently attractive cycle that kicks off this new Naxos collection of his vocal music, begins with an energized, quasi-Bartókian intro on solo piano. It's soon joined by a striking vocalise, courtesy of mezzo Christine Abraham, that gradually soothes the accompaniment into relative tranquility. Thus, once the actual text begins, we're in the right mood for the vivid Pacific Northwest imagery of Robert Sund's poem. (Lewis writes in the notes that this cycle depicts his own journey from San Francisco to visit Sund in Washington State.) In the second song, "Night Along the Columbia," Lewis uses an evocative rolling triplet accompaniment to underscore the first part of the poem ("Far out on the dark river / A fish jumps"), and continues to provide equally well-suited

musical representations for the excursions that follow. Lewis is skilled at setting his texts so that the meaning and imagery land with impact, and his euphonious, extended tonal language is a good fit for Sund's idyllic celebrations. Abraham's clear, glowing declamations are as eloquent as the music and the poetry; she is given sympathetic support throughout by the sensitive pianist Keisuke Nakagoshi, who also provides fine descriptive playing in the solo passages. In *The Changing Light*, a four-part cycle for vocal quartet and piano, Lewis's originality emerges more fully. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's opening line declares "The changing light of San Francisco / is none of your East Coast light / none of your / pearly lights of Paris," and Lewis follows suit with strikingly bright and pungent harmonies, including a touch of Manhattan Transfer-style jazz. The kaleidoscopic chromaticisms are vivid musical representations of the different kinds of light ("Changing Light," "Big Sur Light," and "Dictionaries of Light") depicted in this cycle. Commissioned by Craig Hella Johnson for his vocal ensemble *Conspirare*, the piece originally called for twenty-four singers and an instrumental quintet, but it works exceptionally well in this crystalline, stripped-down version, as dazzlingly rendered by The New York Virtuoso Singers Quartet with Stephen Gosling at the piano. The *Five Love Motets* that follow call for a *cappella* vocal quartet, and here the four singers are even more impressive, foregoing any pitch reference from the piano. Setting his own texts, Lewis again provides artful, sophisticated sonorities, as if love opens up previously unexplored harmonic possibilities.

After those two cycles, the ear needs a break from the vocal quartet texture, which Lewis provides with his early cycle *Three Songs From Ish River* (1976–78) for soprano and guitar (Lewis's own instrument), to poems by Theodore Roethke. The moving, folk-like elegy "Going Out to Meet the Moon Whales" is striking in its relative simplicity. The cycle's first entry, "What day is it now?," shows more harmonic and melodic inventiveness; together, the two songs show Lewis's creative range in writing for the voice-and-guitar. The versatile, accomplished soprano Susan Narucki and dexterous guitarist Colin McAllister perform all three songs smoothly and persuasively. —*Joshua Rosenblum*, *Opera News*, January 2017