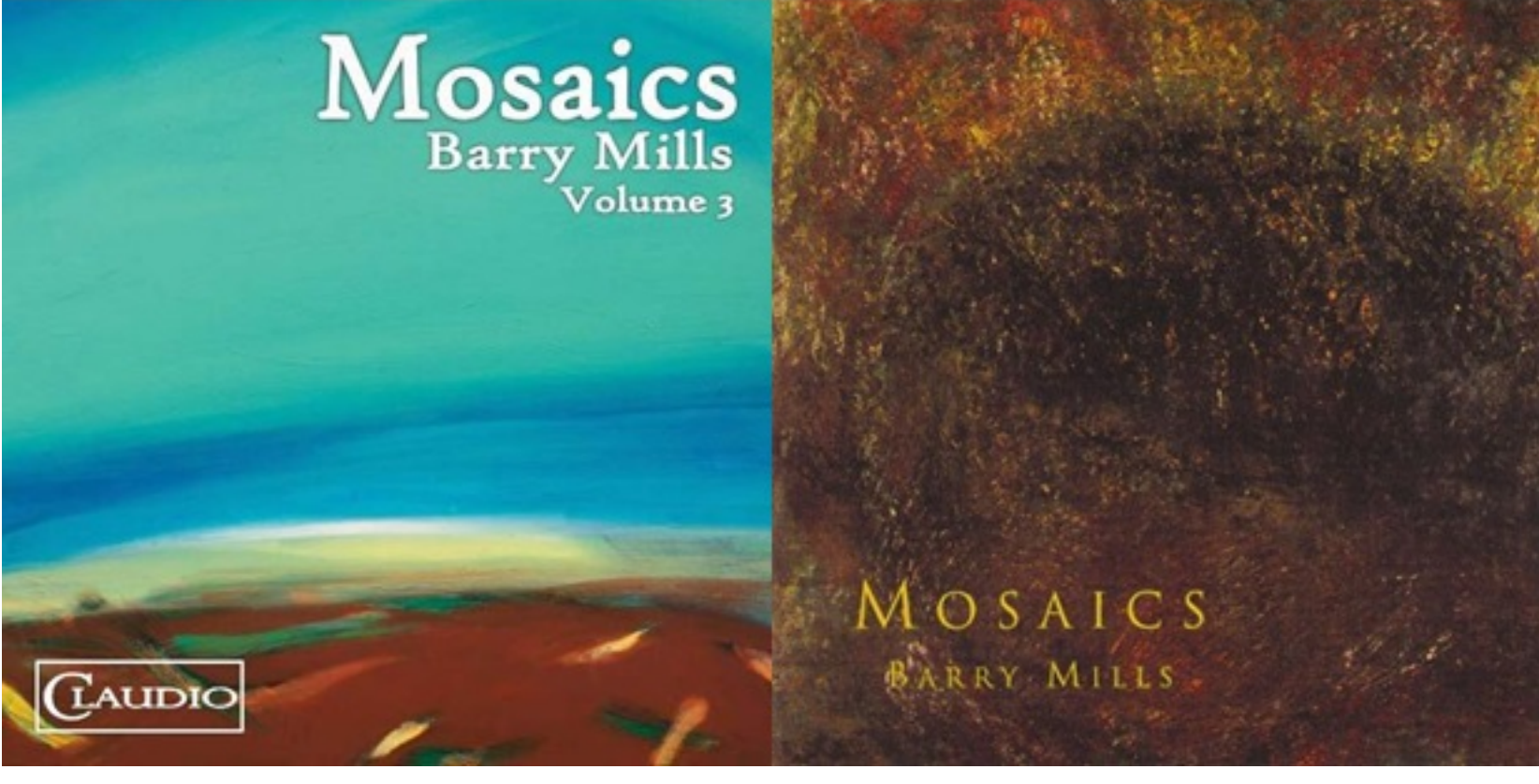


Review of “Mosaics”



NOVEMBER 7, 2019

THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE

MOSAICS Vol. 3 / MILLS: Wind Quintet / Charlotte Munro, fl; Philip Edwards, cl; Catherine Pluygers, ob; Huw Jones, bsn; Henryk Sienkiewicz, horn / String Quartet. Clarinet Quintet / Stuart Deeks, Ellie Blackshaw, vln; Robert Winqvist, vla; Sarah Stuart-Pennink, cel; Edwards, cl / Flute Sketches. Mosaic for Flute & Piano / Christopher Hyde-Smith, fl; Jane Dodds, pno / Duet for Flute & Violin / Caroline Collingridge, fl; Blackshaw, vln / 3 Movements for Viola / Winqvist, vla / Violin Duo / Deeks, Blackshaw / Ocean for Double Bass / Stephen Philips, bs / Duo for Mandolin & Guitar / Nigel Woodhouse, mand; Martin Vishnick, gtr / Where the Sea Meets the Shore / Richard Hand, Tom Dupré, gtr / Claudio Contemporary CC4325-2

This has to be the oddest physical CD I’ve ever reviewed, because as soon as I opened the jewel case, the front cover of the album popped loose from the booklet and landed in my lap! Astonished, I looked at the CD box and there, believe it or not, the booklet was still in place—but with an entirely different cover on it. This is, then, the only album I’ve ever seen that has two different covers at the same time. Both are reproduced above for your viewing pleasure.

Barry Mills, it turns out, is also somewhat odd for a composer. Born in Plymouth, MA in 1949, he got a degree in Biochemistry from Sussex University in 1971 but, having learned to be a composer on his own, returned there in 1976-77 to study musical analysis with David Osmond-Smith and David Roberts as well as composition with Colin Matthews and Ann Boyd. He then became a mailman for 30 years, a job which he says gave him the leisure time to compose in the afternoons! The Society for the Promotion of New Music has programmed three of his pieces: the Clarinet Quintet and Septet and Harp Sketches. Although this is the third CD of his music to be issued under the title Mosaics, it is the first I have been able to review.

Much of the music on this CD sounds, at first blush, like soft “ambient” classical, but it is not. After the opening theme statements of the Wind Quintet, for instance, the harmony suddenly shifts to bitonality, and this vein continues into the development section. Moreover, Mills understands that rarest of all qualities in a modern composer, how to appeal to the heart as well as the mind. Despite its occasionally abrasive moments, this music is appealing, in much the same way that Hindemith and Françaix could be appealing. As the quintet goes on, he uses counterpoint to build his structure but always falls back on lyricism as the uniting force. The music thus has a fascinating dual personality that sometimes contrasts, sometimes blends. Some of it reminds me of the music of my online friend, Augusta Cecconi-Bates, who writes in a similar style reflecting her own personality. And oddly, this quintet ends in the middle of a phrase.

The String Quartet begins with soft murmurs from the cello, above which the violin and viola are heard. Interestingly, Mills seems to use his strings as if they were winds, thus the overall mood, if not the structure, is similar to the wind quintet. Little swells (what singers would call messa di voce, a crescendo-decrescendo on a held note) come and go, as do fluttering tremolos and long, downward glissandi that move through the entire scale chromatically as if he were writing completely non-tonal music as in the case of Julián Carrillo. One thing I’ll say for Mills: his style, though drawn from several sources, is entirely his own. Indeed, the Clarinet Quintet begins with the four strings all playing sliding atonal figures in the Carrillo style, against which we then hear one of the violins playing pizzicato against that backdrop. When the clarinet does enter, it is playing at first in its lower or chalumeau register, blending into the strings as if it were a second viola. Eventually, around 6:25, the clarinet gets its own solo, playing odd themes and variants that slink chromatically through the scale although leaping around the notes in that scale with rapid eighth-note figures. In all of these works, too, the tempo is elusive; one can really only feel a pulse when there is some rhythmic impetus to what they are playing, which is intermittent. Light pizzicato string figures eventually emerge, but here again there is no feeling of a forward-moving rhythm. Then the pace picks up with a clarinet motif, around which the strings play odd figures, sometimes swirling, sometimes sliding chromatically, sometimes in soft tremolos or even touches of spiccato in the bowing. And again, the piece ends in the middle of nowhere.

The Sketches for solo flute follow a similar pattern except,. of course, there is no harmonic texture here to work with in terms of voicing, just one instrument that cannot play chords. Yet even here, his use of “slithering” harmonies is injected into the flute’s lines, creating a forlorn rather than a serene mood. He also has the flautist blow air sideways into the mouthpiece, creating a somewhat edgy quality. This, then, almost blends into Mosaic for flute and piano, which uses similar themes at the outset but changes subtly with the entrance of the piano, playing what appear to be random notes in the upper treble end of the keyboard. The pianist acts here, to my ears, less like an accompanist and more like a solo-note percussion instrument that is trying to find its way through the odd labyrinth of Mills’ musical construction. This is also the first composition to be broken into individual sections, four movements in fact, but even in the faster second movement the piano sticks to single-note runs and gestures, sounding to some extent as if it were chasing the flute but never quite being able to catch up no matter how “busy” the music gets. And in the pattern of the preceding works, the fourth and last movement presents no real resolution, just another musical maze through which flute and piano meander trying to find each other but not quite meeting up.

The Duo for Flute and Violin opens with the latter instrument playing very high, whining notes while the former is again spitting across the mouthpiece of his instrument. Then the flute settles down, if such is the proper term for it, to play what sound like random atonal notes while the violin plucks its way through equally atonal pizzicati. This random-sounding duet goes on for a little more than five minutes, with the pieces slowly but surely falling into place. Another strange piece, excellently played. The 3 Movements for Viola are in much the same vein while the two-movement Violin Duo has one playing high, held notes while the other plays lyrical lines around the first. The second piece opens with one of the violins playing those atonal slides once again.

Oceans for Double Bass is another atonal piece, opening with the bass playing very low As before moving into its strange journey. Up and down the neck of the bass the player goes, contrasting a few semi-lyrical motifs against low grumbles and edgy, serrated figures. Following this is the Duo for Mandolin and Guitar, which follows a similar pattern to the preceding works. Here, however, Mills seems to revel in the plectrum effects he can elicit from the two instruments, which in themselves create interesting patterns.

We end our journey with Where the Sea Meets the Shore for two guitars, and here Mills explores not merely the plectrum effects of the instruments but also their ability to create lyrical and edgy figures, some at the same time.

This was quite an ear-opening disc for me. You can be sure that I’ll be looking for more of Barry Mills’ music to review in the future.

Lynn René Bayley, The Art Music Lounge