

Review of “Under the Stars”

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Barry MILLS (b. 1949)

Under the stars

Eight Haiku for mezzo and piano [7:15]

Piano

solos: *Transitions* [8:39]; *Landscapes* [9:43]; *The*

Pavilion Gardens [5:16]; *In the Mist* [7:52]

Chief Seattle Fragments for mezzo and guitar

[10:03]

Guitar Sketches (5) [19:04]

Duo for Violin and Guitar [4:25]

Julian Elloway (piano)

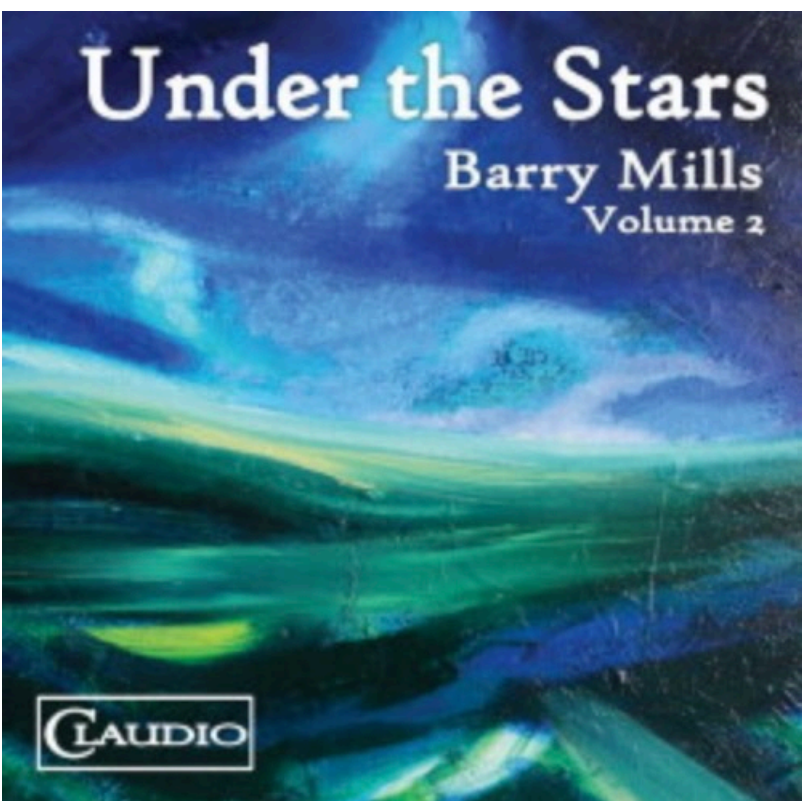
Corinne Shirman-Sarti (mezzo)

Paul Gregory (guitar)

Andrew Sherwood (violin)

rec. 1993, All Saints Chapel, Eastbourne; St John’s Smith Square, London

CLAUDIO RECORDS CC4324-2 [75:02]



English composer Barry Mills found a welcome with Colin Attwell’s Claudio label. The present Mills collection, entitled *Under the Stars*, was first issued in the mid-1990s. It has been fledged afresh and now tries its wing-beat, alongside various other Mills-Claudio re-launches, in today’s market.

The Eight Haiku are simplicity made distant and strange. The words from are all set out in the booklet or, I should say, fold of glossy paper. The programme notes are adequate and we should celebrate that all the sung words (and the poems by which some piano solos have been inspired) are printed there but I would have like to know more about these pieces; perhaps some life or inspirational context. Apart from music-publishers being identified there is little to read. On a more personal note, among the persons thanked for this disc are composers Michael Finnissy and Colin Matthews.

As the liner says, these Haiku trace the passage of the seasons. They show a disciplined minimal approach rather than any suggestion of luxuriating in oriental atmosphere. A tinkling effect high in the piano’s register impart an otherworldly feeling. These songs are, as you would expect, sparely done but are varied with slow swirls of notes ... but when were they written? They somewhat resemble a surely much earlier work: Holst’s *Medieval Songs* for mezzo and violin.

Transitions is another Japanese poetry-inspired cycle but with the music continuous and the piece intended to be enjoyed as an entity. The words that kindled this work are not haiku but single verse poems extended across up to six lines. This distant *Neptune*-style is sustained from the Haiku cycle and also made me think of that Baltic poet of the firmament, [Urmis Sisask](#).

Transitions are not songs but piano solos inspired by Japanese poems. These deliquescent dreams resemble Sorabji but with simplified textures. There’s no trace of Sorabji’s extrusion and compression and length of expression. *Landscapes* continues an immersion in the piano language of *Haiku* and *Transitions*. These are thoughtful pieces moved into notated form by something that was touched off in Mills psyche. There can be little doubt that the twinkling of stars and the interplay of direct and reflected light are there among sudden flurries that are assertive and commanding. Then, just as suddenly , there is a sinking back into mysteries.

The composer does let slip that he used to work at Brighton’s pavilion gardens for a number of years. His *The Pavilion Gardens* also step out, very much, from same book as *Haiku* and *Transitions*. *In the mist*, another solo piano piece, was inspired by the changes wrought by the morning mists seeping and surging around a valley in Granada.

Then come the *Chief Seattle Fragments*. These are the Chief’s ponderings on the passage of time and the descent of the once great native Indian tribes. Their treading down by hungry generations of white men is offset by the fact, as the Chief sees it, of their being in turn swept away. For guitar and mezzo, the words are again set in English and are printed in full. This is more of a prose meditation than a poem. It is very moving, especially around the words “there was a time when our people covered the land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea ... there is no death only a change of worlds...”.

The *Guitar Sketches* (Across Water; Summer Wind; Rain; Fireworks; Under the Stars) are bare and spare yet always accessible and very enjoyable. Mills is even more resourceful when writing for guitar. Ideas seem to cross, bounce and bump to good effect. *Under the stars* plays to a mood Mills is completely at home with. I would urge guitarists to seek out these pieces. They appear challenging yet are intensely rewarding for the listener. The *Duo* also reflects this sense of renewal.

It is good that the Claudio label is giving fresh chances in an ever-expanding ever-forgetting musical world. We should also recall Claudio’s [Milner](#) and [Bush](#) CDs rescued from Hyperion vinyl. As noted on their website all new releases from Claudio are now available as 24/192 Stereo Blu-ray Audio Discs or HD Download as well as standard CD.

Rob Barnett