



THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE

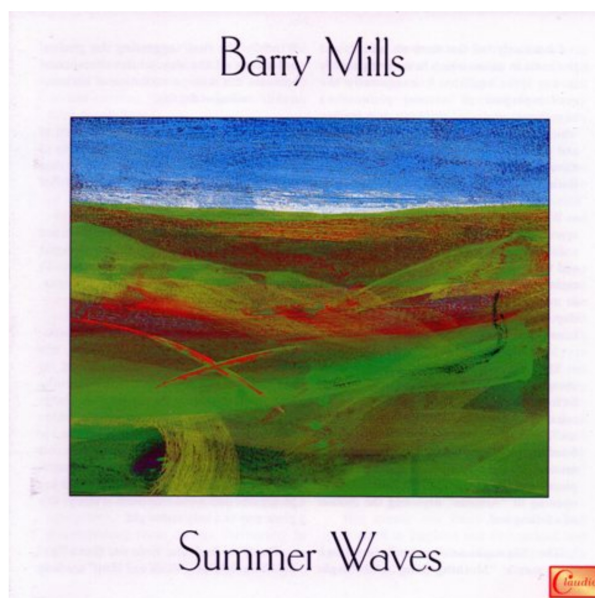
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More Music by Barry Mills

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LEAVE A COMMENT



SUMMER WAVES / MILLS: *Saxophone Sketches* / Tony Sions, *a-sax* / *Saxophone Quartet* / Simon Stewart, *s-sax*; Samantha Ellis, *a-sax*; Katie Samways, *t-sax*; Caroline Williams, *bar-sax* / *The Wind and the Trees* / Philip Edwards, *cl* / *Duo for Flute & Clarinet* / Charlotte Munro, *fl*; Philip Edwards, *cl* / *Guitar Quartet* / The English Guitar Qrt / *Trio for Flute, Viola & Guitar*. *Trio for Flute, Viola & Harp* / Alison Back, *fl*; Peter Sulski, *vla*; Paul Gregory, *gtr*; Hugh Webb, *harp* / *Harp Sketches* / Webb, *harp* / Claudio Contemporary CC5153-2

We return again to the fascinating and often deceptively “normal” music of Barry Mills. Heading up this collection are the *Saxophone Sketches* played by one Tony Sions, who has the most flute-like alto sax tone I’ve ever heard in my life: soft, bright, liquid, and in this work, bristling with trills. In fact, I’d have to say that Mills’ treatment of the alto sax is flute-like in many respects, and the music itself weaves its chromatic and sometimes pentatonic way through several permutations in the four short pieces that make up this suite which, heard sequentially, sound almost like a continuous piece. As I’ve mentioned before, Mills has a unique way of writing music that almost sounds like “ambient classical” but is much more interesting in its construction, taking the listener through unexpected twists and turns, although in this piece the reliance on small cells of downward and upward-moving chromatic phrases—similar but not identical to the way Debussy treated the flute in some of his music—brings it closer to the French style of composition than most of his works.

By contrast, the *Saxophone Quartet* seems to emphasize the

richness of tone that these instruments can produce, although again Mills' writing for them is wholly unique. Anchored by the baritone, the quartet is built from the ground up rather than from the top down, if you know what I mean. Not too surprisingly considering its similarity of range, the soprano sax is treated almost like a clarinet and plays that way. Perhaps one reason why the instruments sounded a bit strange to me is that they are so classically played that no vibrato is used, which always takes some richness away from the upper voices (soprano and alto). I'm just so used to the way saxophones are used by American composers, which leans a little more heavily on the way jazz musicians play these instruments, and until Lester Young emerged as a major force in the late 1930s no one was playing the tenor sax with so little vibrato. The music here is no less reliant on chromatic movement, but it also has longer and more formed melodic lines, and these are often given to the baritone and the tenor while the soprano and alto play in double time above them.

In the liner notes, Mills explains that for him the processes of nature are a constant inspiration for his music: "Watching trees moving in the wind, appreciating the freshness of a new day as it unfolds, being aware of the passage of time and the ending of things as day gives way to night are all poignant experiences..." And nowhere on this album is this more evident than in the clarinet solo, *The Wind and the Trees*, which relies even more on *glissandi*, here often stopping on notes that are, so to speak, "between the cracks" harmonically. The *Duo for Flute and Clarinet* inhabits much the same sound-world, but backs off a bit from the *glissandi* found in the previous piece, and here is it the flute, now whispering, now growling a bit, that is treated differently.

Yet the *Guitar Quartet* that surprised me even more, using soft thumps on one of the instruments to create a strange opening while the soloists played a number of extended chords, all rather slowly and atmospherically, eventually playing in a polyphonic style with the different "voices" complementing each other. This is a little masterpiece. The English Guitar Quartet combines two regular instruments with a treble guitar and a "classical bass guitar." Unlike Vol. 2 of his chamber music, the pieces on this CD contrast with each other in sound texture if not in tempo or always in key, thus the *Guitar Quartet* is followed by the *Trio for Flute, Viola and Guitar*, music in the same vein but with a different sound texture. In places, Mills has the viola play in its lower range, which almost makes it sound like a cello.

Mills also subverts our expectations in the *Harp Sketches*, where the instrument is played, in places, one string at a time, only seldom having the player employ the kind of sweeping, "angelic" chords we are used to hearing from this instrument. In this respect, he treats it like a large guitar, and the effect is mesmerizing. Quiet and mysterious, the music floats across your consciousness in short phrases, tremolos and isolated notes.

We conclude this particular journey with the *Trio for Flute, Viola & Harp*. The strong connection with nature that informed all of the pieces included here is just as strongly evident in this piece, but once again Mills has found new ways to use these three instruments to produce both harmonic and textural effects that are unique.

Another fine album of music from this gifted composer!

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