

MusicWeb International Review by Simon Jenner

An extraordinary but delicate chill descends at the opening of the Bekova Sisters' (before they were famous) disc of Plymouth-born Barry Mills' music. This is partly due to the sonics which are supremely caught by engineer Colin Attwell in each of the four discs in 1993 (only the last disc is unclear about when). Imagine a Webern space with touches of atonality; and modality, different types of modes rather like Messiaen - especially the octatonic scale. The pieces themselves are usually no more than seven or eight minutes, quite often only four or five minutes or in the form of tiny triptychs. Then scrub out some of the maximalism, insert a Feldman-scaled sound-world, sounding timeless and unwinding unhurriedly, but somewhat more compressed - a lot more in fact. Then the melodic figurations, often with a kind of jewel-watch precision and turning; recalling tiny winding-up motifs: Ligeti, perhaps Donatoni or Dusapin. Rhythmically Mills is insidious, unwinding over apparently unhurried paragraphs until you realise that a good deal of notes have been expended in a small space without seeming to be. That's the Feldman feel to these remarkable, microcosmic works. Taking another tack, when you look at a municipal gardener clearing leaves in Brighton Pavilion, imagine him writing a Ligeti-esque piece etude 'Pavilion Gardens' both of which, of course Mills did.

Barry Mills was born 13 November 1949. After reading Bio-Chemistry at Sussex 1968-71, and taking an MA in music there in 1976-77, studying with Colin Matthews and Ann Boyd, and analysis with Dayid Osmond-Smith and David Roberts. Mills first worked for the Brighton Corporation, then when it was nationalised, from 1990 as a Postman, to give him time to compose in the afternoons.

The opening CD is a rich, remarkable exploration of piano/strings combinations. The Piano Trio, more chordally assertive and pianistically harder-edged than other works, recalls a distant forefather in its haunted chill, Bridge's Piano Trio No. 2 of 1929. They could be profitably programmed together, where Mills's more compressed world asserts itself over seven minutes in a soaring set of solos. He rarely writes much in the way of pure tuttis, preferring to skein out the instrumentation and language, some tangle of melody, some shifting thread of tonal logic; a centre revolved round, for instance a frequent use of minor thirds, or an ostinato pattern. The importance of each musical gesture and colour, a harmonic tension suggestive of atmosphere, light and shade links to Webern and Debussy.

The Piano Quintet is a more rounded beast, making ampler claims in a single movement of 8'09" - unlike the delicate programme titles of the Trio, something Mills employs frequently and Darmstadt-shamelessly The Quintet too unravels a softer grained piano against a dialogue of more massed writing, for Mills. More reminiscences of a Ligeti sound-world suggest themselves. Despite its brevity, the Quintet like the Trio is enormously satisfying, quite solidly realised and memorable in its melodic contours.

Other pieces for solo violin and violin or cello with piano, or for violin and cello (neatly counterpointing the whole world of Ravel), each contribute to Mills' two kinds of sound-world. Both are related under the foregoing remarks, but solo pieces tend to soar in a more angular way, breathe with an ardent-edged lyricism that one can recognise as part of the clear modernist tradition. There's a paradox in this too, since Mills when confronted with the most melodically recalcitrant of instruments, the guitar, writes nearest to his edge of atonality,

especially in the Duo for mandolin and guitar on the third disc. And this just when you'd expect a mushy film track or at least a diatonic pliancy in ensemble work. Solo cello pieces on this first disc, or the solo double bass in the next, are like everything else beautifully executed and caught. They point at a bass-heavy language that Mills explores, for instance, in Tartano, for piano and orchestra. But given his instrumental timbres here, they of course get only the piano for support; a support Mills only feels drawn to occasionally, the way a painter doesn't use black for shadow.

Mills' use of the mezzo voice is, however, far more angular - and haunted. The Eight Haiku - seven by Basho, one by Muira Chora, and the Chief Seattle Fragments, are remarkable in understanding the true proviso that really only fragments of words can truly be set: that to really set a poem you have to destroy it, as in *Pli Selon Pli*. Mills more compassionately sets haiku and lets these float over the voice, so again the atmosphere can both hyperventilate in its intensity, and release itself. The melismas of the setting are more important in their nuance than their individual word: a paradox since Mills possesses a jewel-like technique and is never blurred. The truth is that the haiku as a form sets up a final line as release mechanism, and isn't about word painting or articulating imagined worlds in quite the way other longer pieces are. Much of the intensity can be subsumed in an inflection, a kind of pay-off in music.

The second disc features a masterly String Quartet, which spins away from quartet textures in a teasing and enchanting manner, but with a gritty quality at times that leaves you in no doubt as to its abstract power. Violins, then viola and cello take leads and fade motifs, twist textures towards each other like glinting threads in a cat's cradle. This, like the sectional Clarinet Quintet that follows it, is another one of Mills' finest works. Mills is naturally made to write for the Bb clarinet, its long-suspended melancholias perfectly adapted for his subversion and transformation of these into something other than that. This Quintet, like its piano counterpart, embarks on a miniature odyssey, more readily identified in its movements, where the clarinet is delicately pitted in between the spaces of the String Quartet. Mills has a remarkable gift, letting wind and strings mesh in timbres that render them multi-valent to each other. There are discords, but never an *avant-gauche* jar. Before either of these pieces, the Wind Quintet again sharpens the sense between the instruments, as well as fulfilling this in bewitching melodic profile, sometimes the merest tangled wisps. Again, one is reminded of Ravel and more powerfully Bridge. He would have understood Mills.

The piano pieces, too, whether with the Bekova Sisters in the Children's Pieces or the three in the third volume, recognize that not entirely-screened out English pastoral. It's a language at once modernist and purified of all superfluous weight, even that of more obvious modernist techniques - though these lie unobtrusively in the texture. One critic has in fact called him a 'tonal Webern'. The listener is directed, as in a pointillist painting, to each glowing note and the resonating space around it. In fact this purification of language, despite the apparent heterogeneous pulls here of Feldman, Webern, Ligeti, is Mills' hallmark, together with his instantly recognizable sound-world and melodic gift. Like George Benjamin, he can display each fully in the service of modernism; there's no sense of post-modernist compromise yet the music is serenely beautiful, and appeals to a wide audience. The piano pieces rarely pull virtuoso resources down onto them, but in fact their gently cascading vortices and evocative titles command a technique from the player, one of gradation and terracing. These sound like quieter Ligeti Etudes, but descriptive, as though Bridge had convinced Ligeti of something. It reveals an Englishness in spite of all internationalisms, or perhaps because of them this peculiar essence is revealed when most

bare, as in the piano works, where everything has to be negotiated on one betraying instrument. These should - and could easily - be programmed at a Radio 3 Lunchtime concert. Like most of Mills' work they remain largely unpublished and hardly known.

The first three discs, covering music Mills wrote from 1985 to 1992, aren't dated or placed in any chronological order. The guitar pieces - the Five Sketches are all titled and the last gives the third disc its title - often wander in some hidden narrative to a single string line, resonant and utterly spare, recalling the early works of Richard Rodney Bennett. These, and some of the winds point to the last disc, which might have been recorded in 1993 and 1996, and though released later, seem to inhabit a larger, more public sphere. The solo saxophone piece recalls, if one has to use the parallel, Jan Gabarek in the sonic hit - Colin Atwell's engineering again - as well as the full noise of the Sax and Guitar Quartets respectively. But a few seconds dispel the too comfortable John Harle sound-world, there's that melody treated to a wailing wire again, somewhere near the edge of what it's supposed to do. Not any harshly dissonant flutter-tongue or abrasive attempts to wrench the natural rounded word of the sax, but to edge its capacity from the inside up to its genuinely expressive limits. Again one follows Mills in one of his faster movements, again like something that has been wound up before the piece commences and is being released, like a pre-signalled language where we've come in at the dénouement. The Sax Quartet unwinds in a way we've expected, sparing in its alternation of sonorities, but here Mills prepares even more cunningly, and there's more a sense of larger-scale organisation, more tutti, with a few Macmillan-like wails (from his Clarinet Quintet) - purely coincidental but the former's were rhapsodised over - we're in more recognizably tonal territory.

The Clarinet piece, 'The Wind and the Trees', is a nuttier, more quizzical offering. One often feels among Mills' contemplative and natural universe (he's a keen Green activist) a benign, amused humour. Here's one sharply burbled minute of evidence. The clarinet and flute duo seems to extend this into a twined colloquy, winding down and up in a kind of ghostly sarabande. The Guitar Quartet is a more wild heterogeneous affair than even the Saxophone sister, and it shows. But ever insidiously, like some of those early Rodney Bennett pieces where he was truly exploratory, and not exploiting himself. The guitars follow each other down a glittering dark valley of sound, unravelled. They form a kind of slow cascading arc, a model that Mills often brings to mind. The Trios which both employ flute and viola swap harp for guitar, and thus both come within the same Debussian (and Baxian) ambit. There's a language here that fully exploits the viola's range, and indeed Peter Sulski has helped release in Mills many of this underrated middle-fiddle (to borrow Grainger's bizarre pseudo-anglicising) seams. Tougher, but timbrally more spectral and glistening in higher registers - burnishing off altogether in a kind of slow high-wire vanishing. This is Mills' contribution to the healthy English (and composer-as viola player generally from Mozart to Britten) obsession with this very British instrument. The harp too, provides more than points of colour, a tickling serration of almost visible waterfalls - an 18th century cliché from the Welsh harp, but in this case oddly apt.

Mills has written more extensive works, including symphonies, for orchestra. Satisfied as we can be with these heroic Claudio recordings, Mills must move to take more centre-stage, and orchestrally really breathe the large concert hall air he's heir to, as it were. He is very frequently performed in New Music Brighton concerts and by other southern counties ensembles, and is much appreciated by them. He's also performed in Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the Czech Republic. NMC have recorded him, and the powerful, spare Tartano of 1991 has been recorded on Vienna Modern Masters 30401 by the Moravian Philharmonic

Orchestra in June 1996. It evokes a landscape in Italy, willowing between percussion-keyed delicacies and slow-falling woodwind solos, wound in those familiar gyring patterns, with tuttis of colour and forward-moving harmonies. Mills is clearly master of all genres he's so far tackled. More must follow. There is more than a touch of genius in some of these works; here's a major miniaturist who in fact has had larger works simply sidelined. Mills was not a composition student initially, and his lack of contacts has told against him, despite the endorsement of Matthews and others. He really must now receive his due. Start with the Bekova Sisters, then move to the Clarinet Quintet and String Quartet disc, with the popular Wind Quintet the opening piece. The last disc has a feel-good factor unusual for Mills, yet is as profound, and some might prefer to start there.

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