



THE ART MUSIC LOUNGE

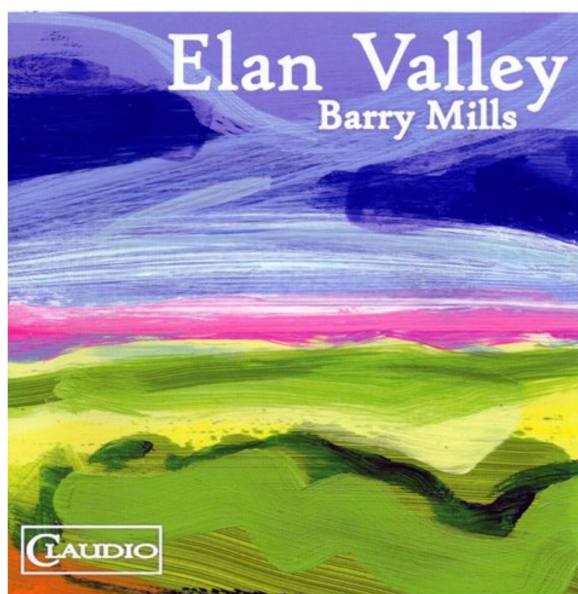
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One More from Barry Mills

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LEAVE A COMMENT



ELAN VALLEY / MILLS: *Elan Valley. Mandolin & Guitar Concerto.** *Evening Rain – Sunset. Guitar Concerto.*+ *Mandolin Concerto* / Daniel Ahlert, *mand*; *Birgit Schwab, +Sam Brown, *gtr*; Moravian Philharmonic Orch.; Petr Vronsky, *cond* / Claudio Contemporary CC6040-2

This recording of Mills’ music breaks from the chamber music sequence to present some of his orchestral compositions. The style is not significantly changed, but the textures are more varied and thus more interesting. In *Elan Valley*, for instance, one hears fluctuating sounds played by the brass, probably using mutes, to create an unusual texture, and although he employs his normal use of chromatics and extended chords, he also leans more heavily, I think, on simpler, more tonal passages more often, perhaps taking a cue from Aaron Copland’s works of the 1940s. The vacillation between extended harmony and more tonal chords helps to vary the mood just as the richer sound palette helps to extend his musical dialect, so to speak. Around the six-minute mark, for instance, the sound “opens up” quite interestingly, and the ensuing bassoon solo has a strangely Slavic sound about it, which is then mixed into his “nature” sounds that follow.

By contrast, the *Mandolin-Guitar Concerto*, in four movements, presents faster, more complex and more tonally ambiguous lines, fast-moving in the first movement and complemented by strings and winds mirroring the guitar’s rapid eight-note motif, which then changes during the development section. This is a wonderful piece, one that could easily be programmed into any modern music concert and draw praise for its ingenuity and excellent construction. Mills sometimes has the guitar and mandolin playing rapid lines

together, sometimes against one another, but always with the orchestra inserting its own commentary. In the second movement, titled “Serenade,” Mills also tosses in brief French horn and clarinet solos to add color as well as to add to the evolving theme. Yet even here, he has the mandolin and guitar play rapid lines to contrast with the lyrical ones, which continues into the third movement. This cat-and-mouse game between the two soloists, which never quite breaks out of fast repeated figures but does contain some variations on them, continues throughout the concerto, even when things calm down as in the last movement, “The Ever-Changing Sea.”

Evening Rain – Sunset is another of his evocative nature pieces, here using a repeated motif played by the muted trumpets (and, it sounds, trombone) while the lower strings rumble menacingly off and on underneath. A rising eight-note figure appears in the lower brass which is then echoed, slightly differently, by the strings before the tempo suddenly decreases and we hear a rocking figure played by the clarinet with French horn commentary underneath.

In the *Guitar Concerto*, Mills leans heavily on folk songs for his material. I don’t mind folk songs as such, but unless they’re harmonically interesting to begin with, as in the case of Magyar folk music, or harmonically altered as Benjamin Britten did, I just don’t respond to their use in classical music, and here Mills presents the folk songs fairly “straight,” merely scored for guitar with strings. Of course, if you like this sort of thing more than I do, you’ll surely enjoy this more than I did. I did, however, like those passages where Mills abandoned the folk tunes per se and inserted his own musical personality.

With the *Mandolin Concerto* we return to the Barry Mills style I admire most, stretching the tonality to produce unusual melodic lines and sonorities, except for the second movement, “My Singing Bird,” which is again based on a folk song. Interestingly, however, in this movement Mills not only has the mandolin play much like a banjo but, later on, does develop the music in more harmonically interesting directions. Overall, this was, for me, an excellent piece and a big improvement over the guitar concerto.

A generally excellent album, then, and one that bears careful listening for the wonderfully subtle things that Mills can do with an orchestra.