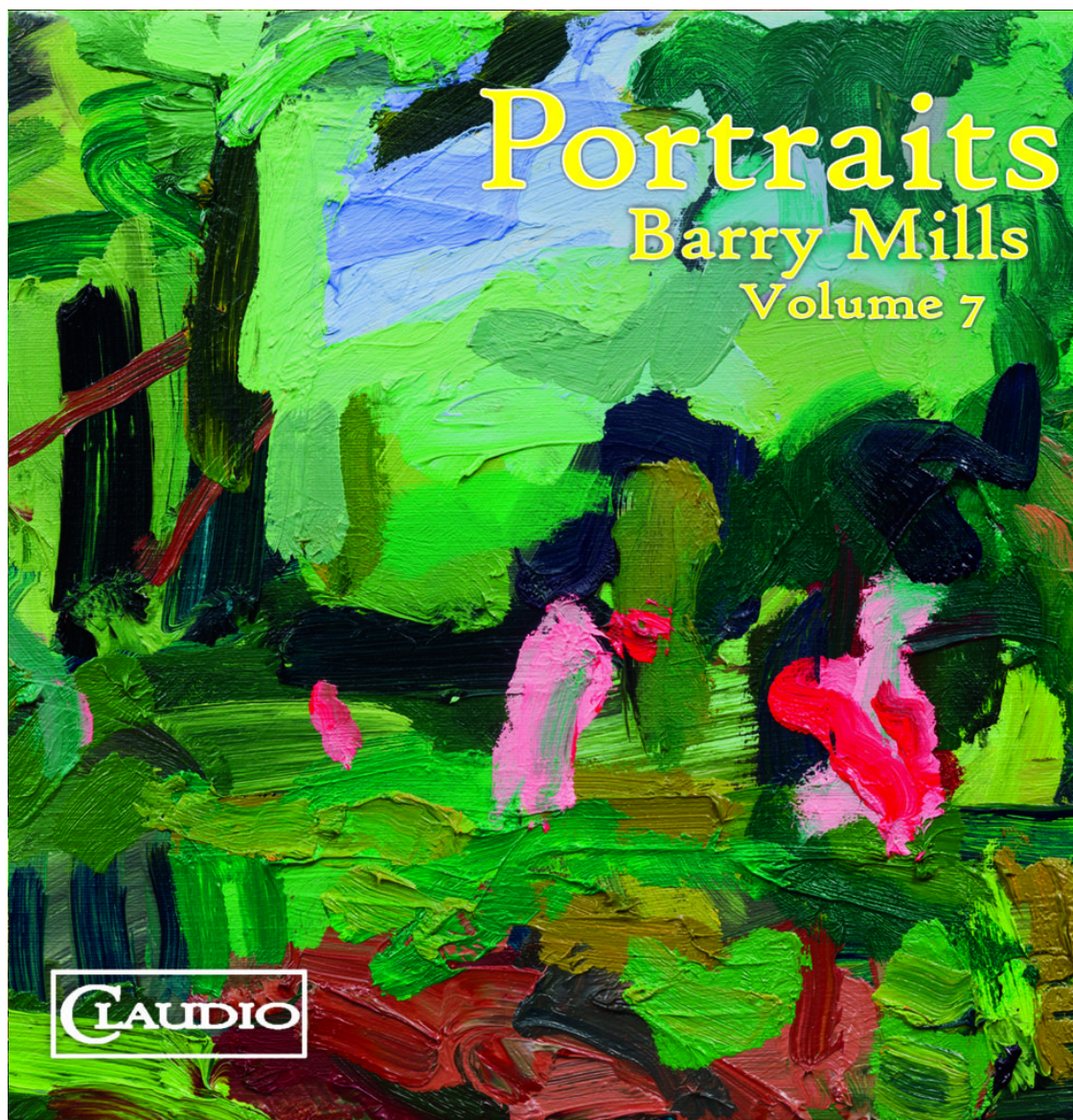


BARRY MILLS: Portraits / Caledonia

Oct 22, 2022 | CD reviews



Volume 7: PORTRAITS

Ensemble Reza

Brighton Chamber Ensemble

CLAUDIO CC6050-2

Volume 8: CALEDONIA

The Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra

CLAUDIO CC6051-2

The first of these two CDs, *Portraits* contains seven chamber works. The second, *Caledonia*, offers four works for orchestra.

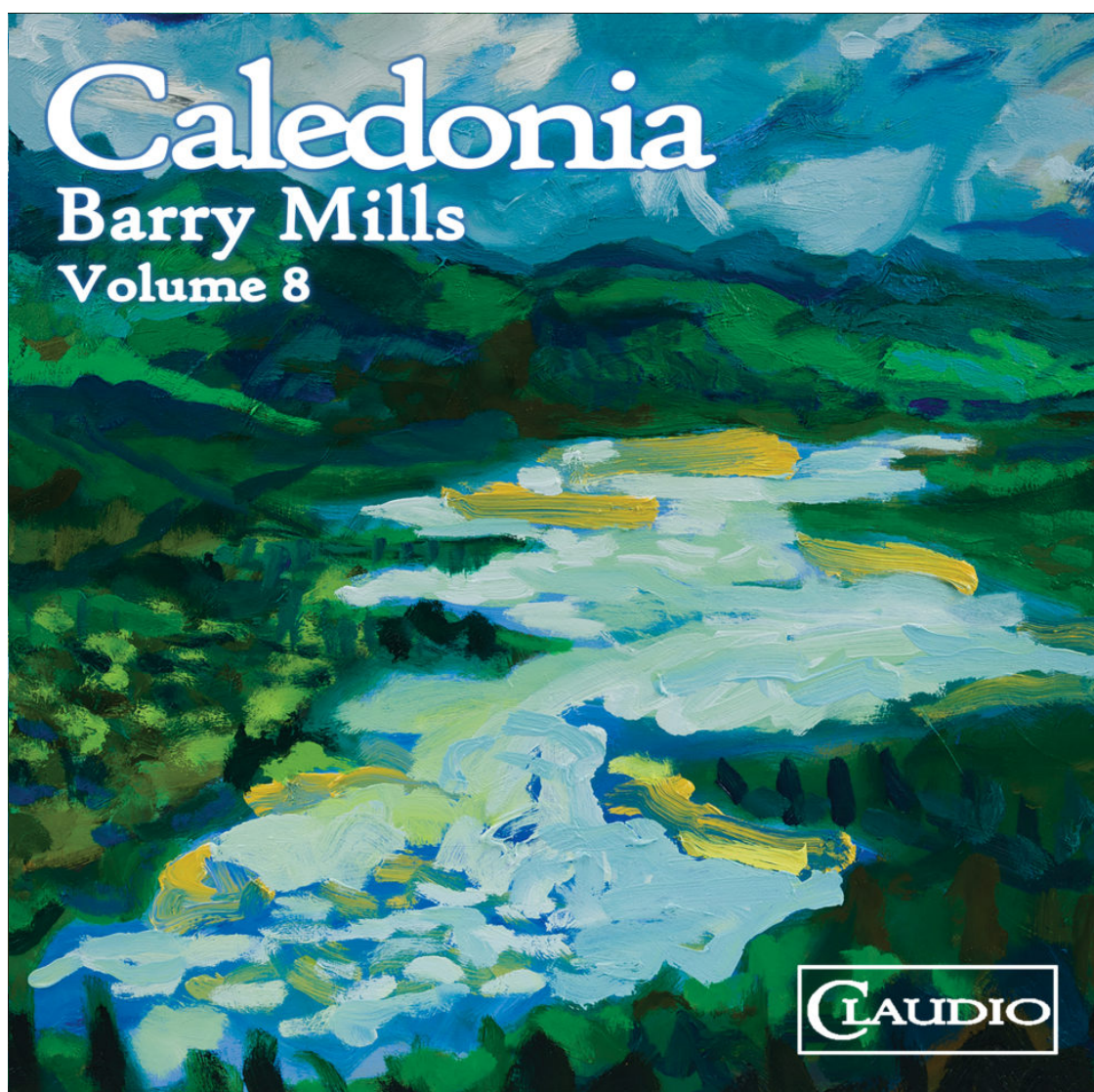
Portraits presents two Trios, Oboe, Cello & Piano, then Clarinet, Viola and Piano, both performed eloquently by members of the Brighton Chamber Ensemble. The first offers a Theme and Variations followed by four pictorial movements including *Dancing Raindrops* or *The Wind that came from Nowhere*. The use of rhythm and instrumentation is graphic in its impact. Some of the music is for all three instruments but there are duos and sections of piano solo too. The result suggested a kind of musical pointillism.

The second Trio in four movements is more abstract although the third movement, *In Memoriam Glen Capra* is emotionally powerful. Glen Capra (1968 – 2019) was a Canadian-born pianist and chamber musician who settled in Sussex. Mills' chamber music style warmly embraces traditional scalar and arpeggio writing.

The string players of Ensemble Reza perform both the *String Sextet* which is transparently scored. Both this and the 'String Quartet' are abstract though fully tonal. The final movement of the Quartet surprises when,, after three abstract movements, we enjoy variations on a folksy dance tune.

Pianist Rachel Fryer performs two pictorial pieces, the first in three movements, *Giraffes*. I certainly got the idea behind *Cherry Blossom*.

I particularly enjoyed the three songs at the end, two settings of poems by Lord Byron and one by Henry King (1592 – 1669). With the beautifully delicate soprano singing of Timea Gazdag accompanied on lute by Sam Brown, Barry Mills achieves a convincing marriage between modernity and early music. A bit like Peter Warlock perhaps?



The second CD, *Caledonia* opens with a single movement in four sections entitled *Four Places in Tenerife*. Mills proves himself to be a master of expressive orchestral writing. Ocean waves and garden breezes come powerfully alive.

The *Trumpet Concerto* explores so many different sound possibilities of the instrument using different mutes. The second movement based on the Cornish folksong, *I'll Love My Love* is particularly delightful, played so smoothly by Imogen Whitehead on flugelhorn. There is fine orchestral and cello playing by Esther Ward-Caddle in *Swords into Ploughshares* a very appropriate work these days.

I have left till last the work which I thought was by far the best from both CDs. This is *Caledonia* which gives the second CD its title. Each of its three movements opens with painterly music descriptive of varied Scottish landscapes – *Ripples on the Surface of the Loch*, *Highland Rain* and *Moorland Mist*. Mills manages to marry these openings uninterrupted with gorgeous orchestral colourings of Scottish folksongs. Solo harpsichord played by Nathaniel Mander introduces just some of the songs. Above all, the overall shaping of this work is masterful. Each well-chosen item flows beautifully into the rest. Mills' orchestral settings, though different from those of Vaughan Williams, stand proudly alongside those of the master.

Review by Alan Cooper



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