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AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES
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A Labor of Love

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich discusses her new Septet



ELLEN TAAFFE ZWILICH

by Fred Cohn

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The November-December calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 12. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.

It didn't take long for Ellen Taaffe Zwilich to agree to Sharon Robinson's proposal. "About a nanosecond," the composer recalls. "I said, 'I'd love to' before I even thought about it."

We're on the roof garden of a New York City coffee shop, discussing the composer's recent Septet. It's a brilliant early-September day, but for all the abundant light around us, the sunniest element on the terrace is the composer herself. She radiates an unaffected excitement about the work, derived both from the pleasure of having written it and a justifiable pride in the result.

The Septet addresses a practical concern: the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio often performs with the Miami String Quartet (Robinson's brother Keith is its cellist), but the musicians have trouble finding repertoire for the combined forces; any piece chosen will leave one or more players offstage. When the idea of commissioning a septet occurred to Robinson, Zwilich was the first person she turned to. The ties between the composer and the KLR go back a long way: the ensemble had introduced her 1987 Piano Trio and her 1988 Triple Concerto; Robinson and Jamie Laredo premiered her 1991 Double Concerto. "I love these people—they're like family," says Zwilich.

"We knew that she would give us something that was, number one, playable, and

number two, musical and from the heart,” says Robinson, in a separate phone conversation. “She’s serious and organized in her work habits: she’ll pick a date, and she is never late. She won’t give us something that’s not quite there. You know it’s going to be a great piece. She charges more than anyone else I know—and it’s worth it.”

Robinson and artist manager Frank Salomon assembled a consortium of 12 presenters to share costs and stage performances over two seasons, starting with the work’s April 28 premiere at New York City’s 92nd Street Y. (The Virginia Arts Festival performance on May 6 received support from the NEA’s “American Masterpieces: Chamber Music” initiative.) The repeated performances not only give the work a wider airing than it would get from a single commissioner; they allow the interpretation itself to mature and deepen.

“It’s wonderful for the piece,” says Zwilich. “A piece of music has to *marinate*. Before the first performance, I have a lot to say. But I like the idea that there’s a point where it becomes *their* piece, not mine: I happen to have written it, but now it belongs to them.”

The unusual instrumental configuration presented Zwilich with both a challenge and an opportunity. She responded with a work in which the two ensembles sometimes play in opposition, and sometimes join in quasi-symphonic effusions. “You can’t write something like this without it sometimes getting orchestral,” she admits. “But I love chamber music so much that when I write for orchestra, I’m applying some of the same ideas. Why should the first violins be higher than the cello? The whole idea of orchestral writing is that it’s like a layer cake—one layer on top of the other. But with chamber music, you don’t know what is going to happen. A chamber music player is all ears, responsive to the other people. He knows when to lead, when to follow, when to be a virtuoso. The whole music has these electrical interactions.”



THE KALICHSTEIN-LAREDO-ROBINSON TRIO AND THE MIAMI STRING QUARTET, PREMIERING ZWILICH’S SEPTET AT NEW YORK CITY’S 92ND STREET Y.

The Septet’s first movement is entitled “Introductions,” and the use of the plural is deliberate. This isn’t just the introduction to the piece, but an occasion for formal introductions between the players, as at a diplomatic summit. These are effected through musical quotations: the trio announces itself through the first measures of Zwilich’s Piano Trio; the quartet through the opening of her String Quartet No. 2. “The two ensembles have lives of their own and their own personalities,” Zwilich said. “I wanted to put that in the mix.”

The second movement, “Quasi una passacaglia,” calls for the players to alternate between a romantic, *espressivo* sound and “Baroque style,” *senza vibrato*. These interpretive instructions are, in part, Zwilich’s tribute to the flexibility of contemporary instrumentalists. “Within my memory, there was a French style, a Russian style, a German style of playing,” she says. “Now we’ve got the whole notion of historically informed performance, and the idea that there isn’t one way of playing—the style comes out of the music. I like that a lot.”

Earlier generations of chamber music players would also have had trouble achieving the rhythmic looseness needed for the jazzy third movement, “Games.” “You can ask people to play now with a little bit of jazz style—that also is a new

thing,” says Zwilich. “You can tell them, ‘Give it a little groove.’” The movement nonetheless proved to be the most difficult for the musicians to master. “We hadn’t really encountered that kind of rhythmic complexity with [Ellen’s] music,” Robinson says. “It surprised me, but delighted me. Once we worked it out, it felt like a great achievement.”

The brooding fourth movement is entitled “Au revoir,” but Zwilich is thinking of renaming it. “It’s more a summation than a ‘see you later,’” she says. “But I like the idea of ‘until the next time.’”

The KLR/Miami combo played the 24-minute piece in four different venues this past spring; the rest of the 12 presentations start in November. It has thus far been a stimulating experience for the musicians, according to Robinson. “In all of Ellen’s music, she speaks from her heart,” she says. “This piece especially is a leap forward in terms of the depth of what she’s saying. It’s going to be played, going to last.”

Robinson cites “accessibility” as a key characteristic of the Septet. “Audiences love it,” she says. This is surely due, in part, to the tonal, neo-Romantic mode of the writing. But Zwilich’s music didn’t start out that way: her development mirrors the recent history of concert music, moving from serialist orthodoxy to an exuberant

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embrace of eclectic influences. As a young composer, she studied with Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter and wrote in an atonal style; the arch-modernist Pierre Boulez led the premiere of her 1973 *Symposium for Orchestra*.

But in 1979, the sudden death of her first husband, violinist Joseph Zwilich, made her reexamine her whole mode of composition, and turned her toward a softer mode. “When something happens like the death of a spouse,” Zwilich says, “It either wipes you out or makes you stronger. It makes you rearrange all your priorities. There are lots of things in careers that people think are important, and if you really look, they’re really silly. The whole notion that composers have to exemplify a *style* is silly—I mean, it’s ridiculous!”

Even though she writes music that pleases a wide range of concertgoers, Zwilich asserts that she doesn’t write for audiences. Put more precisely, she writes for the most limited of audiences: herself, and the musicians who take up her work. “You’re not talking about Esterházy Palace, where you know who’s out there,” she says. “The music will be performed in cities I’ve never been to, countries I’ve never visited. The idea of knowing your audience is kind of bizarre in the 21st century.”

The collaboration between Zwilich and the KLR will continue. Their next project will be a bass quintet, intended as a companion piece for Schubert’s *Trout*. Once again, a consortium of presenters will act as co-commissioners. And once again, Zwilich will have an opportunity to do the things she loves most—writing music.

“I’m the happiest person of my age you know,” Zwilich says. “Because I love my work!”

Fred Cohn is Chamber Music’s consulting editor.

NOVEMBER 2 Washington, D.C.

PRESENTER: **John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts** PROGRAM: Nolan Gasser’s *Cosmic Reflection* ARTISTS: American Brass Quintet (Raymond Mase and Kevin Cobb, trumpets; Michael Powell, trombone and John D. Rojak, bass trombone). www.americanbrassquintet.org

NOVEMBER 4 Seattle, WA

PRESENTER: **Earshot Jazz Society and Seattle Symphony** PROGRAM: Wayne Horvitz’s *These Hills of Glory* and Bill Frisell, *Things Will Never Be the Same* ARTISTS: odeonquartet & Carla Kihlstedt, violin; pianist Cristina Valdes; flutist Paul Taub; and clarinetist Laura DeLuca; guitarist Bill Frisell. www.earshot.org

NOVEMBER 6 New York, NY

PRESENTER: **The Juilliard School Paul Hall, Lincoln Center** PROGRAM: Shafer Mahoney’s Brass Quintet (NY Premiere) ARTISTS: American Brass Quintet (Raymond Mase and Kevin Cobb, trumpets; Michael Powell, trombone and John D. Rojak, bass trombone) www.americanbrassquintet.org

NOVEMBER 9 Conway, AR

PRESENTER: **Hendrix College** PROGRAM: David Sampson’s *Entrance* and Joan Tower’s *Copperwave* ARTISTS: American Brass Quintet (Raymond Mase and Kevin Cobb, trumpets; Michael Powell, trombone and John D. Rojak, bass trombone) www.americanbrassquintet.org

NOVEMBER 12 Portola Valley, CA

PRESENTER: **Other Minds Festival** PROGRAM: Henry Cowell, *Adagio* from *Ensemble*; Toccata, Piano Music, Songs, Quartet Euphometric, String Quartet No. 4 (“United”) ARTISTS: Sarah Cahill, piano; Wendy Hillhouse, mezzo-soprano; Jodi Gandolfi, piano; Colorado String Quartet www.otherminds.org

NOVEMBER 13 San Francisco, CA

PRESENTER: **Other Minds Festival** PROGRAM: Henry Cowell, Prelude for Organ, Processional, Set of Five, Songs, Piano Music, Ground & Fuguing Tune, Hymn & Fuguing Tune No. 14, Sonata for Violin & Piano, Quartet Euphometric, String Quartet No. 5 ARTISTS: Sandra Soderlund, organ; Abel-Steinberg-Winant Trio; Wendy Hillhouse, mezzo-soprano; Jodi Gandolfi, piano; Sarah Cahill, piano; Colorado String Quartet 3 www.otherminds.org

NOVEMBER 14 Kalamazoo, MI

(Dalton Center Recital Hall, WMU)
PRESENTERS: **Fontana Chamber Arts and Opus 21** PROGRAM: *Electric Don Quixote* (The Works of Frank Zappa) ARTISTS: Opus 21 (Richard Adams, artistic director; Bradley Wong, clarinet; Henning Schröder, saxophone; Alexa Muhly, cello; Yu-Lien The, piano; Judy Moonert, percussion; Greg Secor, percussion) www.fontinachamberarts.org

NOVEMBER 20 Somerville, MA

PRESENTER: **Boston Musica Viva** PROGRAM: Joseph Schwantner’s *Elixir*; David Rakowski, *Mikronomicon*; Chris Arrell’s *NARCISSUS/echo*; Charles Ives/arr. Pittman, *Five Street Songs* ARTISTS: Pamela Dellal, mezzo-soprano; Richard Pittman, conductor; Ann Bobo, flute; William Kirkley, clarinet; Robert Schulz, percussion; Geoffrey Burleson, piano; Bayla Keyes, violin; Jan Müller-Szeraws, cello bm@bmv.org

NOVEMBER 21 Los Angeles, CA

PRESENTER: **Kronos with Los Angeles Philharmonic** PROGRAM: Artists will collaborate in an overlapping musical experience, drawing inspiration from their West Coast background ARTISTS: Kronos Quartet (David Harrington and John Sherba, violins; Hank Dutt, viola; Jeffrey Zeigler, cello); Matmos, electronics; Terry Riley, organ; Mike Einziger, guitar www.kronosquartet.org

DECEMBER 1 Los Angeles, CA

PRESENTER: **Kronos with Los Angeles Philharmonic** PROGRAM: Ingram Marshall, *Fog Tropes* (brass version); Harry Partch, *US Highball*; Frank Zappa, *Yellow Shark* (selections) ARTISTS: Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group, John Adams, conductor; Kronos Quartet (David Harrington and John Sherba, violins; Hank Dutt, viola; Jeffrey Zeigler, cello) www.kronosquartet.org

DECEMBER 3 & 4 Los Angeles, CA

PRESENTER: **Kronos with Los Angeles Philharmonic** PROGRAM: Jerry Goldsmith, *Music for Orchestra*; Mason Bates, *Liquid interface*; Erich Korngold, Cello Concerto; Thomas Newman, *Work for Kronos Quartet and Orchestra* ARTISTS: Kronos Quartet (David Harrington and John Sherba, violins; Hank Dutt, viola; Jeffrey Zeigler, cello) www.kronosquartet.org