

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich
Recent Press Quotes

A game involving lists of nine “desert island” symphonies has been making the rounds on Facebook this week.... Basically the challenge is to come up with a list of nine symphonies by nine different composers.... Since we’re New Music USA after all, I thought I’d further up the ante with a list devoted exclusively to works by American composers.

... I’m reserving this [No. 1] slot for Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s first symphony from 1982, which was the first composition by a female composer to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music (1983). The stickler’s may cry foul here since ETZ originally titled the work “Three Movements for Orchestra.” Well, tough...

-Frank J. Oteri, NewMusicBox, 2/4/15

It had become a ritual in some concert halls: stay for the Beethoven — leave before the Boulez.

Audiences were voting on contemporary music with their feet, and they didn’t necessarily like what they heard.

But Ellen Taaffe Zwilich has turned that formula around.

-James Chute, San Diego Union Tribune, 8/3/11

...neo-baroque works by Stravinsky and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich...look back to the past without leaning on it.

-David Patrick Stearns, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 12/13/10

Zwilich’s music is distinctive not only for its superb craftsmanship, but also for its wit, lyricism and sheer beauty, making it immediately appealing to listeners.

-Janelle Gelfand, Cincinnati.com, 3/3/10

Metro Detroit's spring celebration of the 70th birthday of composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich has been a highlight. ... The immersion has been fun and enlightening, underlining Zwilich's superb craftsmanship, lyrical melodicism and audience-friendly voice.

-Mark Stryker, Detroit Free Press, 5/23/09

From the time composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich popped into conspicuous view on the American music scene, by winning the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for her Symphony No. 1, she has enjoyed unending praise for a stream of fresh and appealing new works that never fail to delight and surprise.

-Lawrence B. Johnson, Detroit News, 5/14/09

Ms. Zwilich ... occupies a unique place in the pantheon of contemporary classical music. In 1975, she became the first woman to earn a doctorate in composition from Juilliard, and eight years later became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for composition. The popularity of her music, often described using terms like “romantic,” “accessible” and “audience-friendly,” has lifted her name into the firmament of Americana: “Zwilich” has been the answer to a New York Times crossword clue and a Jeopardy! question, and appeared in Charles Schulz’s Peanuts comic strip.

-Damian DaCosta, The New York Observer, 4/27/09

The first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in Music (in 1983), Ellen Taaffe Zwilich has been at the forefront of the American composing scene for awhile, and now, with another milestone on the horizon – her 70th birthday is on April 30 – her music has shown no signs of losing its grip on musicians, who love to perform it, and audiences, who love to hear it.

-Kevin Filipiski, timesquare.com, 4/09

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra (2020)

“Composer Zwilich adds to her musical legacy with Cello Concerto premiere. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich is one of America’s preeminent composers, with a consistently excellent body of work in multiple genres spanning nearly five decades — including another standout that had its world premiere on Thursday night with the South Florida Symphony Orchestra and cellist Zuill Bailey. ...an important addition to the cello concerto literature.”

-Lawrence Budmen, South Florida Classical Review, 3/6/20

“Zwilich’s Snazzy Cello Concerto Soars In Florida. ... Can the cello play bebop? Maybe not typically, but in the hands of cello soloist Zuill Bailey giving the world premiere of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s jazzy Cello Concerto, the answer is a resounding yes. ... The three movements, played without pause, had a narrative drive and coherence stemming from an inner pulse that propelled the music. If anything, this expressive, impeccably detailed, technically sophisticated work felt a bit too brief, leaving me wanting to hear more.”

-John Fleming, Classical Voice North America, 3/12/20

“The blues haunts Zwilich’s fine new cello concerto. The concerto’s three linked movements suggested a meditation on melodic gestures from the American vernacular. The blues hovered over the work allusively, but the musical materials always generated multifaceted meanings that were compelling yet evanescent, ranging from gently introspective to aggressive.”

-Dennis Rooney, Palm Beach Arts Paper, 3/19/20

Concerto Elegia for Flute and String Orchestra (2015)

“The piece is an outstanding addition to the flute repertoire.... Zwilich, a Miami native and Pulitzer Prize winner, has conceived a lyrical and rhapsodic rumination that exploits the solo instrument’s colors and range. ... The score is masterfully conceived, with the beautiful string writing complementing the whirling solo lines.”

-Lawrence Budmen, South Florida Classical Review, 4/19/15

Passionate Diversions – Zwilich’s Quintet for Violin, Viola, Cello, Contrabass and Piano; Trio for Piano, Violin and Cello; Septet for Piano Trio and String Quartet – Azica Records, 2014

[The musicians] capture every mood and nuance in these masterful works by one of America’s leading compositional lights. Recommended, then, on every level, as an essential acquisition for your collection of contemporary chamber music.

-David DeBoor Canfield, Fanfare, 10/1/14

Zwilich's disc, *Passionate Diversions*, is like a musical sprint: tremendous amounts of emotional and physical energy are expended in a very short period of time. One of the most successful things about *Passionate Diversions* is the full spectrum of emotions and colors that Zwilich leads the listener through.

-Jordan Borg, NewMusicBox, 7/29/14

Her music combines the sophistication of a modern composer with an approachability that pleases her listeners. ... The Quintet for Violin, Viola, Cello, Contrabass and Piano (2010) ... is an extraordinary well integrated work, highlighted by the middle movement "The Moody Trout" which transforms a small quote from Schubert's work into an evocative bluesy fantasy—and a vivacious finale that's lots of fun. ... The Septet for Piano Trio and String Quartet (2008) develops tension from the very get-go by creating dialogue between the Miami String Quartet and the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio. It has an orchestral sound that is both exciting, and dreamily Romantic. ... Their superb performance reflects the fun they must have had in making this CD.

All three of the works on this disc are enjoyable yet sophisticated chamber works that represent the music of one of America's finest composers.

-Robert Moon, Audiophile Audition, 5/21/14

Voyage for String Quartet (2012)

In a nod to their string-quartet ancestors, the St. Lawrence played *Voyage* (2012) by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, a wondrously concentrated piece commissioned for the centennials of the founding members of the Galimir String Quartet, formed by Felix Galimir in 1927 on the centennial of Beethoven's death. Without any literal quotes that I could detect, Zwilich managed to invoke aspects of the Galimirs' personal and professional journeys, pulling in French and Jewish associations. The piece highlighted an intense sweetness that was, for all but especially for [violinist Scott] St. John, a most appealing trait.

-Peter Dobrin, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 1/31/13

...South Mountain hit the bull's-eye with the commission of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's "Voyage," premiered by the St. Lawrence String Quartet....

-Andrew L. Pincus, The Berkshire Eagle, 12/28/12

... the piece proved an instant success. Like Zwilich's other works, the 11-minute piece is easily approachable by an audience - the South Mountain audience burst into a noisy ovation – yet tough fiber lies below the surface.

Perhaps it was only by association, but the writing seemed to recall the Vienna of the Galimirs' time. It opened with the echo of a waltz and went on to evoke the Second Viennese School – especially Berg – in its melodic contours, irregular meters, slightly acid harmonies and bold use of pizzicato. ... Indeed, much of the overall appeal is the invocation of tradition amid fresh areas of expression.

-Andrew L. Pincus, The Berkshire Eagle, 10/9/12

Quintet for Violin, Viola, Cello, Piano, and Contrabass (2010)

The Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio, celebrating its 35th anniversary, performed Zwilich's new Quintet with violist Michael Tree and bassist Harold Robinson before a packed house in the First Unitarian Church, Avondale. The new Quintet proved to be a crowd-pleaser that had the audience on its feet at the conclusion. But it also seems destined to find a home among the established chamber music repertoire.

-Janelle Gelfand, Cincinnati Enquirer, 1/16/12

Bent Notes Suffused With Blues

Ms. Zwilich made a point of citing Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, which has the same instrumentation, and calling her central movement "Die Launische Forelle" ("The Moody Trout").

But Schubert appears only obliquely; more strikingly, the work is suffused with blues harmonies. You hear it in bent notes in the violin and viola lines, in brisk running passages on the piano, and most of all in a recurring syncopated three-note figure — an ascending and descending minor third — that calls to mind a similar motif in the hard-rocking finale of Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 7. And though Ms. Zwilich changes meters often in all three movements, the piece has a pulse that makes it hard to resist.

-Allan Kozinn, The New York Times, 12/4/11

Zwilich has her way with Schubert's 'Trout'

New companion pieces to long-established masterworks are arriving with increasing frequency, often with an inhibiting effect on the most strong-minded composer. But not Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

The 72-year-old author of numerous rock-solid concertos and chamber works was commissioned, partly by the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, to write for the instrumentation of Schubert's Trout Quintet, and if anything, found an even more defined voice. At the Oct. 19 local premiere at the Kimmel Center by the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio (augmented by violist Michael Tree and bassist Harold Robinson) Zwilich's fine Quintet came off as if the melodious Schubert piece didn't exist.

-David Patrick Stearns, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 10/26/11

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich world premiere a jazzy delight at SummerFest

Only Zwilich, who wrote her piece for the same instrumentation as Schubert's Quintet, could somehow find the Gershwin in Schubert. In the second movement of her Quintet, which received its world premiere Sunday at SummerFest, Zwilich took a snippet of Schubert's melody, augmented it until it was nearly unrecognizable, and transformed it into an all-out jazz-inflected romp. ... No wonder the Quintet was a crowd pleaser, earning a standing ovation from the audience in Sherwood Auditorium.

-James Chute, San Diego Union Tribune, 8/8/11

Septet for String Quartet and Piano Trio (2009)

The language is post-romantic, thematic materials are memorable and dramatic (even cinematic), and her handling of the instruments is extremely colorful. ... The musicians obviously love this music and they made their listeners love it, too.

-Mary Ellyn Hutton, MusicinCincinnati.com, 10/18/10

There must have been something liberating for Ellen Taaffe Zwilich (left) to compose her Septet for piano trio and string quartet -- she says as much in a program note -- because it felt like a **modern masterpiece** in Thursday's performance at the Capitol Theatre. There are no other known septets for this combination of instruments, and that seemed to energize the two ensembles for which it was written, the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and the Miami String Quartet, who were giving their 10th or 11th performance of the work since its premiere about a year ago. At this point, these superb musicians are so far inside the music that they gave a spectacular, immaculate performance. Who says chamber music has no passion?

-John Fleming, St. Petersburg Times, 4/9/10

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's new Septet is a bear hug of a piece, wrapping a muscular piano trio around a strutting string quartet. As the bold phrases flow back and forth, the two ensembles dance in a powerful, exhilarating match of wills.

-David Stabler, *The Oregonian*, 3/9/10

Zwilich's Septet is a powerful, moving work, surely destined to become a part of the canon.

-Ken Keaton, *Palm Beach Daily News*, 1/19/10

A compelling and eclectic work that should easily pass into the standard repertoire of chamber music.

-Jeffrey Rossman, *Classical Voice of North Carolina*, 11/7/09

As played with robust and nuanced charisma by the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and Miami String Quartet, the score emerged as a finely wrought, organic and rich tapestry of ideas. ... In the finale, Zwilich sums up the work's many themes with such skill that the seemingly novel instrumentation is revealed to be a sonic means to a deeply musical end.

-Donald Rosenberg, *The Plain Dealer*, 11/6/09

...a magnificent Septet written for the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and Miami Quartet. ... Here was what seemed like a full orchestral sound, as Zwilich opened with a quote from her Trio followed by another from her Quartet No. 2. ... It is an utterly substantial 26-minute work.

-Gil French, *American Record Guide*, September/October 2009

Zwilich has actual, challenging ideas that she explores with passion, decisiveness and humor in this new piece (which premiered just a week ago in New York). Her four movements are investigations. The first examines ways a trio and a quartet can relate to each other and recombine; the second is a passacaglia-variation set that views the theme through the kaleidoscopic lens of historical styles; the third explores the possibilities jazz offers to an already rich musical vocabulary; and the last is a wrap-up and reconciliation of what has just happened. Together, the septet is a snapshot of a party where people are introduced, have conversations, play and then go their separate ways...[the performance] bristled with passion, intensity and color.

-Joan Reinthaler, *The Washington Post*, 5/7/09

Written for the famed Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and the Miami String Quartet, the work is possibly the first written for this kind of instrumental grouping, and as such attests to the inventiveness that has made Ms. Zwilich one of America's most respected composers. Last week's world premiere performance, in New York, was deeply satisfying. In her masterly deployment of this novel instrumentation, she manages to integrate the trio and quartet while maintaining their individuality within the overall musical fabric. Moreover the emotive drama of her thematic ideas, the logical clarity with which she develops them, and the architectural polish of each movement make this an important addition to the chamber repertoire, and one that warrants frequent performance.

-Barrymore Laurence Scherer, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5/5/09

Ms. Zwilich, who celebrates her 70th birthday on Thursday, has added to [her] catalog with a Septet for Piano Trio and String Quartet, which received its world premiere at the 92nd Street Y on Tuesday with the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio and the Miami String Quartet.

Given the popularity of the piano trio and string quartet in the chamber music literature, it seems logical that more composers might have combined the two in septets. There are instead myriad other combinations using piano, strings and winds.

Thus Ms. Zwilich (who was the first woman to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music and the first to receive a doctoral degree in composition from the Juilliard School) had no famous historical precedent to study.

The seven members of the ensemble alternated as soloist and partner throughout the four distinctive movements. In “Introductions,” it initially sounded as if the trio – the pianist Joseph Kalichstein, the violinist Jaime Laredo and the cellist Sharon Robinson – and quartet might be uneasy collaborators, but they soon united for a fiery orchestral interlude that ended in unison.

In “Quasi una Passacaglia” a repeated motif was played in unison between several instruments and then shared among the group, with nods to baroque idioms and more romantic, exuberant ideas. The jazzy “Games” was followed by the more introspective “Au revoir,” whose voluptuous middle section was followed by a quiet finale.

-Vivien Schweitzer, The New York Times, 4/20/09

Symphony No. 5 (2008)

Under the baton of James Conlon, the work made a profound impact. The second movement, “Celebration,” is especially touching. While its bracing, extroverted passages for brass and bongos in major keys are suitably jubilant, a persistent tug toward minor keys suggests an underlying poignancy, as though the celebration marks a pyrrhic victory. This impression is emphasized by the movement's final note for cello and double bass, which dovetails into the next movement, “Memorial,” whose aching lyricism soars over chord progressions tinged with the bittersweet melancholy of jazz harmonies. This work, like others in Ms. Zwilich's oeuvre, expresses a quiet, humanist skepticism in tune with the temper of our times.

-Barrymore Laurence Scherer, The Wall Street Journal, 5/5/09

[Zwilich's] mature style — a mix of neo-Classical craftsmanship, roiling energy and tonal accessibility — [was] present in the new symphony, a 24-minute work in four movements.

Subtitled Concerto for Orchestra, the symphony demonstrated Ms. Zwilich's flair for orchestration. Focus restlessly shifted among sections, and from massed groups to isolated soloists. Unorthodox percussion instruments (like the spiral cymbal, a dangling, serpentine coil that offers a distant roar) and techniques (timpani played with a model of wire brush known as dreadlocks) showed that Ms. Zwilich keeps up with recent trends.

A brooding fanfare and crackling martial tattoos in "Prologue" echoed and subtly evolved throughout the work. "Celebration," which could stand alone as a rousing curtain-raiser, bubbled and bristled with youthful ebullience. "Memorial," inspired by Mr. Conlon's championing of composers silenced by politics and war, paid tribute with surprisingly languorous, bluesy figures, redolent of music by Copland and Bernstein. In "Epilogue" elements from the preceding movements resurfaced in a stormy finale.

-Steve Smith, The New York Times, 10/29/08

As Zwilich tells us in a program note, the new symphony follows a path familiar from most of her large-scale compositions in which the entire work – the thematic, harmonic, structural and developmental character – is generated from a few motives heard right at the beginning. By now she handles this technique with uncommon skill, and not a seam shows. Most of the piece's musical interest is contained in the inner movements: a vigorous celebratory scherzo, possibly designed to show off the instrumental skills of the young Juilliard students to whom the piece is dedicated, and a lyrical "in memoriam" elegy in which Zwilich can indulge her penchant for creating long-breathed unison string phrases that float over jabbing, slightly ominous commentary from winds and brasses.

-Peter G. Davis, MusicalAmerica.com, 10/30/08

Repertoire in Performance

neOLIT Ensemble at Bargemusic, New York, NY

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Divertimento (1983) for flute, clarinet, violin and cello begins and ends with gestures bearing Beethovenian echoes, but within that frame the music is vital and inventive. The second movement in particular, a vigorous Allegro, begins with a rhythmically steady pizzicato figure, shared by the violin and cello; the flute and clarinet briefly weave an inviting line around it. ... Ms. Zwilich's work presented an updated, freewheeling look at Neo-Classicism.

-Allan Kozinn, The New York Times, 5/10/10

Yale in New York – Tribute to Vivian Perlis at Zankel Hall, New York, NY

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's Lament for Cello and Piano, a simple, expressive and very beautiful piece, played with a gorgeous tone by Lachezar Kostov, accompanied by Viktor Valkov.

-George Grella, TheBigCityblog.com, 4/27/10

Hamilton-Fairfield Symphony Orchestra, Hamilton, OH

Zwilich's Symphony No. 4...is a stunning find. From the first note, one was struck by the bold, colorful and communicative writing.

-Janelle Gelfand, Cincinnati.com, 3/8/10