

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich Turns 85 on April 30, 2024

A new recording, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: Symphony No. 5, is to be released on April 9 by the BMOP/sound label



Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, at right acknowledging the standing ovation after the world premiere performance of her Orchestral Excursions by the Palm Beach Symphony on Feb. 5, 2024 (photo at right by IndieHouse Films)

[Ellen Taaffe Zwilich](#), the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize in music, the very first holder of the Carnegie Hall Composer's Chair, and a woman who helped blaze a trail in a world that seems only recently to have become truly equal-opportunity, **turns 85 on April 30, 2024**.

On April 9, BMOP/sound releases [Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: Symphony No. 5](#), a recording by the [Boston Modern Orchestra Project](#) of Zwilich's *Upbeat* (1999); *Concerto Elegia* (2015) with flute soloist Sarah Brady; *Commedia dell'Arte* (2012) with violin soloist Gabriela Diaz; and *Symphony No. 5 (Concerto for Orchestra)* (2008).

Frank J. Oteri, in the recording's accompanying essay, writes, "Zwilich's large compositional output ... is deeply steeped in this centuries-old tradition which she has treasured since her childhood (when she actively played violin, piano, and trumpet). ... Still, she is very much a composer of our own time. Her music embraces elements from outside the vaunted classical realm, such as periodic allusions to jazz and popular culture in several of her works or the occasional use of non-Western instruments such as the Middle Eastern dumbek and West African djembe (both of which make appearances in her *Symphony No. 5* included herein). Particularly striking (no pun intended) is Zwilich's meticulously detailed writing for percussion. Her orchestral works often employ an array of different very clearly specified types of cymbals, multiple sizes of snare drums, and on and on. At a music industry reception

20 years ago, Zwilich quipped that all too often ‘percussion is just added to the orchestra like lipstick or earrings.’ For her, percussion is every bit as important as winds, brass, and strings.”

Notable events over the past year for Ellen include the world premiere of *Orchestral Excursions* by the Palm Beach Symphony conducted by Gerard Schwarz in February ([read the South Florida Classical Review here](#)); the 2023 induction into the National Recording Registry by the Library of Congress of the recording of Ellen’s Concerto for Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra performed by David Shifrin and the Northwest Chamber Orchestra ([read the LOC announcement here](#)); New York premiere performance of *Abgang and Kaddish* by Jaime Laredo, Sharon Robinson, David Shifrin, and Shai Wosner presented by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center ([watch the CMS video here](#)); and the inauguration by BMI of the Ellen Taaffe Zwilich Award, “introduced in recognition of the dedication and vision of the longtime chair of the BMI Composer Awards” given annually to young composers ([read the BMI announcement here](#)). Read more [latest news here](#).

In 2022, Ellen was featured in Gramophone magazine’s article [“10 female composers whose music you need to hear,”](#) which said, “[Her] works are regarded for their vigour, assertiveness and ability to challenge both the performer and audience.”

Ellen’s music is widely known because it is performed, recorded, broadcast, and – above all – listened to and liked by all sorts of audiences the world over. From her 1982 Pulitzer-winning Symphony No. 1 to her Concerto for Cello and Orchestra that premiered in March 2020 right before the pandemic shutdown ([see the Delos recording page here](#)), Zwilich produces music "with fingerprints," music that is immediately recognized as her own. In her compositions, Ms. Zwilich combines craft and inspiration, reflecting an optimistic and humanistic spirit that gives her a unique musical voice. As Janelle Gelfand wrote on Cincinnati.com, “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.”

A prolific composer in virtually all media, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s works have been performed by most of the leading American orchestras and by major ensembles abroad. Her discography includes such works as:

- [Quintet for Alto Saxophone and String Quartet](#), the Pacifica Quartet’s recording of which (on *Contemporary Voices*, which also showcases works by Pulitzer Prize-winning composers Shulamit Ran and Jennifer Higdon, a Cedille Records release), won the **2021 Grammy Award in the Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble Performance** category
- That Pulitzer Prize-winning [Symphony No. 1](#) (on a disc that also includes her hugely popular Prologue and Variations and *Celebration*)
- The blistering [Rituals for Five Percussionists and Orchestra](#)
- The [Quintet for Violin, Viola, Cello, Contrabass and Piano](#) inspired by Schubert’s “Trout” Quintet
- ...and the rollicking [Peanuts Gallery](#), a delightful series of musical portraits of Schroeder, Linus, Snoopy, Charlie Brown, Lucy, Peppermint Patty and Marcie.

For more, including the [latest news](#), visit www.zwilich.com