

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: Symphony No. 1, Prologue and Variations, *Celebration*  
New World 80336-2

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich brings all her history and humanity to the music she composes. Born in Miami, Florida, on April 30, 1939, she learned to play piano, trumpet, and violin, her principal instrument, which she studied with Richard Burgin and Ivan Galamian. She began composing at the age of ten and later wrote music for her high-school band. She studied music at Florida State University, where she came into contact with Ernst von Dohnanyi, the great Hungarian pianist of the old European school; later she took degrees at Juilliard, where her principal composition teachers were Elliott Carter and Roger Sessions. As a listener she spent a season working as an usher in Carnegie Hall; as a performer she was a member of the American Symphony Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. Pierre Boulez introduced her *Symposium* (1973) with the Juilliard Orchestra, but her *String Quartet 1974*, which had its conspicuously successful premiere at the ISCM World Music Days in Boston in 1976, probably launched her reputation. Since then she has produced solo works, chamber music of numerous kinds, and music for orchestra. In 1983 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her Symphony No. 1 (*Three Movements for Orchestra*); she was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in music.

In a preface to the printed score of that work, Zwilich speaks of some of her central musical concerns—concerns that link her music to the past and the present and send it searching into the future. She addresses formal and harmonic issues that appear in more than one period of the history of music; she speaks of her commitment to the joy of performing and to the musicians who perform her music. Out of her personal synthesis of these and other factors comes music that is her own:

First, I have long been interested in the elaboration of large-scale works from the initial material. This “organic” approach to musical form fascinates me both in the development of the material and in the fashioning of a musical idea that contains the “seeds” of the work to follow.

Second, in my recent works I have been developing techniques that combine modern principles of continuous variation with older (but still immensely satisfying) principles, such as melodic recurrence and clearly defined areas of contrast.

Finally Symphony No. 1 was written with great affection for the modern orchestra, not only for its indescribable richness and variety of color, but also for the virtuosity and artistry of its players.

Zwilich accepts commissions only when they fit what she wants to compose next. She began the symphony, however, before she had a commission, which then came from the American Composers Orchestra and the National Endowment for the Arts; Gunther Schuller led the premiere on May 5, 1982. Everything in the work arises from the melodic and harmonic implications of the first fifteen bars, music Zwilich says she felt compelled to write. Over a rustle of percussion, the violas, clarified by the harp, sound a minor third, which is then taken up, *accelerando*, by flute and cellos. This makes a kind of motto that signals evolutions of tempo and musical character; these work up to a sustained *allegro* that ultimately subsides into an ending as quiet as the beginning. All the

most complex harmonies come from piling third upon third upon third. Although the structure of the movement is not conventional, the generative use of the interval is perhaps not remote from Brahms's procedures.

The second and third movements are more traditional in their origins: the second movement is a song form; the third is a rondo. But they are not traditional in either sound or form. The slow movement contains an important part for vibraphone and an eloquent cantabile solo for tuba; bells—a characteristic sound in much of Zwilich's music—keep tolling the music home. The last movement combines the functions of scherzo and finale, though the edgy rondo lacks the traditional reassurances of that form: the material retains its chameleon capacity for continuous development and for surprise.

Prologue and Variations for string orchestra was commissioned by the Chattanooga Symphony, which gave the first performance under Richard Cormier on April 10, 1984. The whole of the piece is implicit in the three minutes of its prologue, which is marked “Andante misterioso.” In a note in the score, Zwilich writes:

In using the word “prologue,” I meant to suggest a dramatic analogy, because, in a way, the function of the Prologue in this work is to introduce “characters” (musical ideas), some of which are drawn rather full while others are only suggested. It is in the ensuing section, Variations, that the “drama” unfolds.

There are four variations, each different in character and tempo: Allegro, Lento, Presto, and Tempo Primo (Andante misterioso). These are not variations in the classical sense, because each develops a different aspect of the prologue rather than maintaining its structure. When the original music returns in the last variation, it is richer in sound and implication but no less mysterious as it fades into silence.

In her remarks on this piece, the composer also speaks of her wish to celebrate “the special sonorities, character, and expressiveness of the string orchestra;” qualities her extensive experience as a violinist taught her well.

*Celebration* for orchestra is an overture commissioned by the Indianapolis Symphony on the occasion of the inaugural concerts in its new home, the Circle Theatre; John Nelson led the premiere on October 12, 1984.

For that occasion, the composer wrote the following comments:

In writing this work I was motivated by three complementary goals. First, I wanted to celebrate a joyous and historic occasion with all its inspiring symbolism of beginning and renewal. The celebratory image that persistently came to me was the ringing of bells, so I allowed the work to issue from this image. Sometimes there is a very clear musical image of ringing bells, as in the beginning in the trumpets, strings, and percussion. Often, however the association is more abstract, as in the theme that first appears in the cellos, violas, and bassoon, which seems to issue from the striking of great low-sounding bells and rises to conclude with a high, bell-like figure. The bell image persists in other ways as well, from the harmonics which build from simple to complex through the overlapping of sonorities, to phrases and instrumentation that approximate the amorphous ending of a bell sound. Of course, whatever the dramatic impetus of a

musical work, once it is underway, a purely musical development begins to occur, and this is true of *Celebration* for orchestra.

My second goal was to write a kind of “toccata” or test-piece for the new Circle Theatre. Like an 18th-century organ toccata, *Celebration* for orchestra offers a wide variety of sounds, in this case from very soft to very loud (and many shades in between), and from very low to very high, and from legato to staccato. I thought of *Celebration* for orchestra as an introduction of the hall to the orchestra, and vice versa!

Finally I wanted to celebrate the orchestra itself, which is, after all, the centerpiece of the occasion. Thus *Celebration* for orchestra is like a mini-concerto for orchestra, featuring some of the outstanding soloists in the ensemble, highlighting the various sections, and calling for the highest degree of virtuosity and artistry in the entire ensemble. As a token of my greatest respect, *Celebration* for orchestra is dedicated to John Nelson.

*Celebration* is a *pièce d'occasion*, but it has transcended that occasion; André Previn chose the work to launch his music directorship of the Los Angeles Philharmonic in October 1985. The piece marks a departure for Zwilich in that it almost completely lacks introspection. But that does not make it empty or frivolous. In conversation, Zwilich has spoken of the

twentieth-century conceit that composers can only write soul-searching pieces. But the history of music, its noble tradition, shows how musicians have been involved in every aspect of life, from celebration to lament. In a sense, we have made a false division of music in our time: there is a music only of entertainment, and a music only of profound statement or searching. If we want to be fully human as artists, we have to be able to move freely through the whole range of human experience.—RICHARD DYER

*Richard Dyer is the music critic of The Boston Globe and the Briggs-Copland lecturer in English at Harvard University*

JOHN NELSON was appointed the fourth music director of the Indianapolis Symphony at the beginning of the 1976-77 season. Acclaimed for his interpretations of Berlioz, he has appeared throughout the United States and Europe as guest conductor for leading symphonies and opera companies. He studied at Wheaton College and the Juilliard School of Music, and was later appointed to the conducting faculty at Juilliard. Nelson has recorded for Vox, Philips, Vanguard, and Louisville First Edition Records.

THE INDIANAPOLIS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA was founded in 1930 by Dr. Ferdinand Schaefer, who also served as its first music director. It has grown into a major symphony orchestra under the succeeding music directors Fabien Seitzky, Izler Solomon and, currently, John Nelson. The Indianapolis Symphony under John Nelson can also be heard on an album of orchestral works by Charles Martin Loeffler (New World Records 80332-2).

### Selected Bibliography

Dreier, Ruth. "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich," *High Fidelity/Musical America*, XXXIII (September 1983), p. 4 ff.

Dyer, Richard. "Ellen Zwilich's 'Overnight' Success." *The Boston Globe*, November 11, 1984, p.A8.

Page, Tim. "The Music of Ellen Zwilich," *The New York Times Magazine*, July 14, 1985, p. 26 ff.

### Discography

*Chamber Symphony*. Boston Musica Viva; Richard Pittman conducting. Cambridge 2834.

*Einsame Nacht*. John Ostendorf, bass-baritone; Shirley Seguin, piano. Leonarda 120.

*Passages*. Janice Felty, mezzo-soprano; Boston Musica Viva; Richard Pittman conducting. Northeastern 218.

*Sonata in Three Movements*. Joseph Zwilich, violin; James Gemmell, piano. Cambridge 2834.

*String Quartet 1974*. New York String Quartet. Cambridge 2834.

String Trio. Nancy Cirillo, violin; Katherine Murdock, viola; Ronald Thomas, cello. Northeastern 218.

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Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

Symphony No. 1

*(Three Movements for Orchestra)*

(publ. Margun Music Inc.)

1. I (6:56)

2. II (6:22)

3. III (4:03)

4. Prologue and Variations (12:09)  
(publ.Theodore Presser Co.)

index 1 [0:00] Prologue (3:47)  
index 2 [3:52] Variations (8:18)

5. *Celebration* (8:15)  
(publ.Theodore Presser Co.)

Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra  
John Nelson, conductor

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