

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich
New World 80372-2

ELLEN TAAFFE ZWILICH, born in Miami (April 30, 1939), began her musical studies at Florida State University, where her mentors included the composer and piano virtuoso Ernst von Dohnányi. She moved to New York City and became active in various aspects of its musical life—as an usher at Carnegie Hall; as a violinist in the American Symphony Orchestra during the time of Leopold Stokowski's leadership; and as a student at Juilliard, studying composition with Elliott Carter and Roger Sessions. Her marriage to the late Hungarian-born violinist Joseph Zwilich was an important inspiration for her first acknowledged works; these included a String Quartet, premiered in Boston at the ISCM's World Music Days in 1976. The success of that work brought the composer widespread attention from the musical world.

In the spring of 1982 Gunther Schuller and the American Composers Orchestra introduced Zwilich's First Symphony at a Lincoln Center concert; in 1983 she received a Pulitzer Prize for the piece, the first in the music category ever awarded to a woman. The symphony (recorded on New World 80336-2), seems in retrospect to represent a new declaration of purpose. It is a work of remarkable assurance, drawn from a broad range of musical influences, its material welded into a totally original style and enhanced by a mastery of sonority and tone-color beyond anything Zwilich had previously attempted. One need only listen to the intense, breath-stopping slow movement of that work, with its extraordinary lyrical writing for solo tuba, the otherworldly shimmer of soft bells and vibes, and the long melodic lines that seem never to relax their hold, to sense the presence of an important new voice in American music.

That symphony and its subsequent success firmly established Zwilich's career—a circumstance by no means automatic for Pulitzer laureates. At least four major scores from the year following the award have been widely performed. Of these, *Celebration* and *Prologue and Variations* have been recorded (also on New World 80336-2), and the *Concerto for Trumpet and Five Players* and *Double Quartet* appear on this present recording.

These works alone might serve to demonstrate the broad outlines of Zwilich's stylistic vision, yet they do not reveal the entire panorama. Among more recent works, a second symphony (commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony), a piano concerto, and the orchestral work *Symbolon* (included on this recording) attest to the ongoing strengthening and broadening of Zwilich's purview.

The *Concerto for Trumpet and Five Players* (1984) was commissioned by a consortium of new music ensembles: Sonor, Collage, and the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts. It was premiered on May 6, 1985 by the Pittsburgh New Music Ensemble, conducted by David Stock, with Wesley Ward as soloist. The concerto is a work of boundless, infectious charm, put together in a way that reveals Zwilich's remarkable skill at unifying a variegated work through the fine classic device of working a multitude of changes on simple material.

The “hero” of this otherwise unprogrammatic three-movement work is the solo trumpet, which scampers ingratiatingly onto the scene with a mocking rising-arpeggio figure that will remain its musical motto. “Although there is considerable interaction between the soloist and ensemble,” writes the composer in a note to the score, the

concerto “is, above all, a virtuoso trumpet piece. The trumpet is an instrument I played in high school and college, and I love its versatility.”

Even in the quieter slow movement, the soloist's simple but distinctive arpeggio makes itself known, transferred for the moment to the vibraphone and intruding rudely on an otherwise quiet, gently pulsating sound. In the third movement, the soloist triumphs—the final flourish is the same arpeggio-motive, exultantly trumpeted forth.

The *Double Quartet* for strings, commissioned and first performed by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center on October 21, 1984, explores more serious musical terrain. Again we have a striking demonstration of Zwilich's superb organizational skill. The unifying elements of this four-movement work are more difficult to detect, but they are inescapable. The powerful opening theme with its striding intervallic structure may remind some of the young Shostakovich, as might also the throbbing, intense, declamatory chords of the slow movement. What holds the work together, however, is the subtext of a tonality—D major sometimes clearly expressed, sometimes more subtle. There is a constant tendency to emphasize C-sharp (or, sometimes, the same note expressed as a D-flat); this device sets up a desire for a resolution to D. The effect, rather than being an academic exercise in tonality, is that of an insistent, violent, emotional surge. Only the final movement, an adagio that begins in clouds but ends with the sense of solace in a (finally) untroubled D major, eventually eases the tension.

In the *Concerto Grosso 1985* (subtitled “to Handel's *Sonata in D* for violin and continuo, first movement”), we encounter again the creative use of constructive devices that gives Zwilich's music its consistency and emotional drive. This work was commissioned by the Washington Friends of Handel in commemoration of the 300th anniversary of George Frideric Handel's birth. It was premiered at the Kennedy Center on May 9, 1986 by the Handel Festival Orchestra, conducted by Stephen Simon. As the subtitle suggests, an opening thematic gambit from a Handel violin sonata becomes the generative force of the entire five-movement work. The structure of this opening material—a rising major triad that overshoots the octave (D-F#-A-E) and two rising fourths a third apart (A-D-F#-B)—is in itself so tonally ambiguous that it can lead an imaginative composer down a variety of pathways; by the time the work has run its course, Zwilich seems to have explored them all. The Handelian theme is so strong in its own outline that it makes its presence known even under the most assiduous dissection. The whole piece becomes a study in musical obsession that would surely startle its Baroque progenitor, although it proves to be, after all, a friendly handshake across the centuries.

Symbolon is one of the most widely traveled of Zwilich's works to date. It was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, with funds provided by the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, specifically for the orchestras 1988 tour of the Soviet Union. The work received its world premiere on June 1, 1988 at Bolshoi Hall in Leningrad, with Zubin Mehta conducting. As far as can be determined, *Symbolon* is the first American symphonic work to be premiered in the Soviet Union. After this auspicious beginning, the piece was subsequently performed in Moscow, New York (as part of the First New York International Festival of the Arts), London, Amsterdam, Helsinki, Paris and East Berlin. Zwilich says of *Symbolon*:

The word, *symbolon*, comes from the Greek and refers to the ancient custom whereby two parties broke a piece of pottery (or a stone, or a coin) in two, each party retaining half. Each half (or *symbolon*) thus became a token of friendship as well as proof of identity, of the bearer...From the beginning I knew that the piece would receive its first performance in the Soviet Union, and I found this profoundly moving. I am sure that my complex feelings, embracing both hope and sadness about the state of the political world, have found their way into this work.

Symbolon begins with an open, wide-reaching melodic line that leads to a fierce orchestral buildup. A more lightly scored middle section doesn't relax the tension: groans from basses and percussion create notes of unrest that continue almost to the end. Superheated, grippingly emotional, yet clear and graceful in its overall structure, the piece speaks compellingly of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's high artistry.

—Alan Rich

Alan Rich is music critic for the Los Angeles Herald- Examiner.

ZUBIN MEHTA assumed the post of music director of New York Philharmonic in the 1978-79 season. Concurrently he is music director for life of the Israel Philharmonic. Mehta was born in Bombay, India, the son of the Bombay Symphony's co-founder. At eighteen he began studies at Vienna's Academy of Music; he made his conducting debut in Vienna at the age of twenty-five. From 1961 to 1967 he was music director of the Montréal Symphony, and in 1962 became music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Mehta conducts leading opera companies and orchestras around the world, including the Vienna State Opera and the Royal Opera at Covent Garden. His recordings are on the Columbia, London, Deutsche Grammophon, RCA, and New World labels and include another upcoming release with the New York Philharmonic for New World—John Knowles Paine's Symphony No. 1.

PHILIP SMITH, principal trumpet, joined the New York Philharmonic in October 1978, coming from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which he joined in January 1975. He studied with Edward Treutel and William Vacchiano at The Juilliard School, receiving a master of music degree in 1975. Born in London, Smith began cornet studies at age eight with his father, Derek Smith, a well-known exponent of the classical cornet style in England. Like his father; he is also actively involved in the Salvation Army. Smith is much in demand as a soloist and has performed in Australia, Canada, England, Sweden, Switzerland, and throughout the United States. He is currently bandmaster of the Montclair Band of the Salvation Army and has recorded with the G.U.S. Band for Merlin Records.

THE NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC, founded in 1842, is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States and one of the oldest in the world. Among its celebrated conductors have been Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, Artur Rodzinski, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Leonard Bernstein, and Pierre Boulez. The orchestra has performed in 348 cities in 50 countries and on five continents. In June of 1988 it returned from a triumphant tour of the Soviet Union, which culminated in an historic joint concert with the Soviet Ministry of Culture's State Symphony Orchestra in Moscow's Gorky Park.

Since its first recording for Columbia in 1917, the New York Philharmonic has made hundreds more, on the Columbia, Deutsche Grammophon, London, RCA, and New World labels.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Chamber Symphony. Boston Musica Viva, Richard Pittman conducting.
Sonata in Three Movements. Joseph Zwilich, violin; James Gemmell, piano.
String Quartet 1974. New York String Quartet. CRI SD 546.
Einsame Nacht. John Ostendorf, bass-baritone; Shirley Seguin, piano. Leonarda 120.
Passages. Janice Felty, mezzo-soprano; Boston Musica Viva, Richard Pittman conducting. String Trio. Nancy Cirillo, violin; Katherine Murdock, viola; Ronald Thomas, violoncello. Northeastern 218.
Symphony No. 1; Prologue and Variations; Celebration. Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, John Nelson conducting. New World 80336-2.

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Dyer, Richard. "Ellen Taaffe Zwilich's 'Overnight' Success." *The Boston Globe*, November 11, 1984, p.A8.
Grimes, Ev. "Conversations with American Composers: Ellen Taaffe Zwilich." *Music Educators Journal*, February, 1986.
Gray, Channing. "Composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich scores big in male dominated field." *The Providence Sunday Journal*, May 1, 1988.
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ZUBIN MEHTA

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NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC; ZUBIN MEHTA, CONDUCTOR

Concerto Grosso 1985
(publ. Mobart Music Publications)

1. I. Maestoso (2:41)
2. II. Presto (2:08)
3. III. Largo (4:37)
4. IV. Presto (1:05)
5. V. Maestoso (3:24)

6. Symbolon (9:15)
(publ. Merion Music, Inc.)

Concerto for Trumpet and Five Players
(publ. Merion Music, Inc.)

7. I. Marziale (3:58)
8. II. Lento con moto (5:19)
9. III. Allegro energico (4:02)

Philip Smith, trumpet; Mindy Kaufman, flute/piccolo; Steve Freeman, bass
clarinet/clarinet; Christopher Lamb, percussion; Jon Deak, contrabass; Harriet Wingreen,
piano; Zubin Mehta, conductor

Double Quartet for strings
(publ. Merion Music, Inc.)

10. I. Allegro moderato (6:22)
11. II. Lento (5:10)
12. III. Allegro vivo (5:13)
13. IV. Adagio (3:51)

Kerry McDermott, Daniel Reed, Hae-Young Ham, Oscar Ravina, violin; Judith Nelson,
Peter Kenote, viola; Valentin Hirsu, Nancy Donaruma, cello; Ellen Taaffe Zwilich,
conductor

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