The Music of Ellen Zwilich

by Tim Page

Courtesy of Britain Hill

1 "Do you remember those time-lapse photography films they used to show in high-school biology classes?" Ellen Taaffe Zwilich enquires. "Years of growth were compressed into a couple of minutes. First you saw a root, then a sprout, then suddenly the tree began to grow branches, reaching out in every direction, as if it were dancing. Composers grow the same way. We twist upward, while trying to keep our roots and balance."

2 It's lunchtime, and Mrs. Zwilich, the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for musical composition, has shelved her pencils and music paper for the day. She does the majority of her composing in the morning, she explains. "Music has been running through my subconscious all night, so when I get up, I turn off the phone and become unavailable. And then I work, until my instincts tell me it's time to stop."

3 Mrs. Zwilich—open, friendly, unpretentious and almost disconcertingly without any apparent neurosis—doesn't fit the standard image of a classical composer as a recluse in a garret waiting for the muse. "Does the public have any image of composers at all?" the blonde, blue-eyed musician wonders. "I think most people are under the impression that classical music is something written by dead people.

4 "American classical composers are shadow figures, and the general public is almost completely unaware of us. Go out on the street and ask someone to name five living American classical composers. Maybe, just maybe, Aaron Copland will get mentioned, or maybe Philip Glass, but then you'll get a blank look."

5 A growing number of musically aware people might add Zwilich's name to the list, because, since she won the Pulitzer Prize for her Symphony No. 1 in 1983, interest in her music has increased considerably. Now, having neared the mid-century mark, she has created a handful of exquisitely honed works in a variety of mediums from string trio to symphony. She writes in an idiosyncratic style that, without ostentation or gimmickry, is always recognizably hers. In her early works, one hears the influence of many composers: Her String Quartet (1974) blends the knotty intensity of Bela Bartok with the languorous emotionalism of Alban Berg. In her later music, one finds a clear, logical, and seemingly inevitable structure—arching, charged melodic lines, aggressive rhythms, and a prismatic combination of instrumental colors.

6 Zwilich, the daughter of an airline pilot, has been composing since elementary school, when she would simply make up pieces on the piano and play them again and again. She didn't write anything down until she was about ten and began studying with the neighborhood piano teacher in Miami, where she was born and brought up. "It was an unhappy relationship," she remembers, "because the teacher made me play all these silly children's pieces, and I thought my own compositions were better."

7 By the time she was a teenager, Zwilich was proficient on three instruments—piano, violin, and trumpet. She composed a high-school fight song, was the concertmaster of the orchestra, first trumpet in the band, and a student conductor as well. She continued composing, and, by the age of eighteen, she was turning out full-scale orchestral works.

8 Mrs. Zwilich attended Florida State University in Tallahassee, where she majored in composition, and while there, she played in an orchestra for conducting classes given by the late Ernst von Dohnanyi, a highly respected Hungarian pianist and composer. "Dohnanyi was essentially a nineteenth-century European artist—very Old World—and I was glad to be exposed to that sensibility."

9 She received her master's degree from Florida State in 1962, and after one dreary year teaching in a small town in South Carolina, moved to New York to continue her violin studies with Ivan Galamian (who taught, among others, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, and Michael Rabin). She quickly established herself in the ranks of New York's free-lance violinists, and also spent a season working as an usher at Carnegie Hall. In addition, during this time she played in the violin section of the American Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Leopold Stokowski, where she remained for several years.

10 "I was already aware that I wanted to compose more than I wanted to play. Composers, however, need some kind of hands-on experience, either as conductors or players, because if you know the orchestral repertory only from studying scores and listening to finished performances, you can't really tell all that's going on in the music. A score is, at best, an indication, rather than a final product, and playing in the orchestra allowed me a firsthand experience of the subtleties that fall between score and performance. I was always listening to the variety of sounds the orchestra made—the problems different instruments had in different registers, the details of the ensemble sonorities." While with the American Symphony, she met and married Joseph Zwilich, a fellow violinist and a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.

11 In 1970, Zwilich entered the Juilliard School of Music to study composition with Roger Sessions and Elliot Carter, two well-regarded professionals who proved immensely helpful in her development, allowing her independence yet teaching her everything they knew.

12 In 1975, she became the first woman to earn a doctorate in composition from Juilliard. Shortly thereafter, Pierre Boulez programmed her "Symposium for Orchestra" (1973) in New York, and she began to receive awards, commissions, and critical praise. She produced a String Quartet (1974), a Sonata in Three Movements for Violin and Piano (1973–1974), and the "Chamber Symphony" in 1979.

13 Tragically, also in 1979, Mrs. Zwilich's husband suddenly died from a massive heart attack. "It's still very difficult for me to listen to the 'Chamber Symphony,'" Zwilich explains, "for I had begun writing it before Joe died, and when I came back to complete it, everything had changed. It was a crucible of sorts. I loved Joe very dearly, and miss him to this day, yet his death taught me nothing so much as the joy of being alive—the joy of breathing, walking, feeling well, swimming, the joy of being human. Suddenly all talk of method and style seemed trivial, and I became interested in meaning. I wanted to *say* something, musically, about life and living."

14 Mrs. Zwilich compares the beginning of a new composition to the armature of a sculptor —a general sort of skeletal mold, with a few details in order. She begins with a substantial amount of musical material, sketched over a period of time—motives; themes; harmonic, structural, and dramatic ideas; and a vague conception of form. Then she fleshes the music out, improvising on piano and violin, and working with the notes on paper.

15 Inspiration provides raw material, and then, as Zwilich works with what she has already written, the music evolves. "Inspiration engenders product, which, in turn, engenders more inspiration," she says. "Once I'm into a piece, it starts to feed back into me."

16 Zwilich contends that being a composer is similar to being a playwright who, of course, creates the characters in the play, but after a while, sees the characters begin developing a life of their own. "By the time Act I is over, the playwright pretty much knows what George would or would not say to Martha, and proceeds accordingly, with some sensitivity to dramatic context. After a certain point, a composer's job is to be a good listener—you listen to what's gone before, and then decide how to continue."

17 Each of Zwilich's compositions has had a unique genesis. "I heard the first fifteen bars of my symphony immediately," she recalls, yet all she knew about her work in progress was that she wanted to create something that would exploit the rich sonorities of the American Composer's Orchestra. Then, she recalls, she heard the first fifteen bars of the symphony immediately.

18 Zwilich also has an amusing story to relate about the creation of her string trio. "A friend I hadn't seen in quite a while called me, and asked if I would be interested in doing a work for their first concert. I said that I didn't have the time, but we kept talking for a while, and during the conversation I started to hear music. The trio was already beginning to take shape in my head. So I said I'd think it over, and I did, throughout the rest of the day, and I guess, throughout the evening as well. In any event, I woke up the next morning, and the whole opening section was waiting to be written down."

19 Another composition was taking shape; the tree, unfettered, began to dance.

HOW WELL DID YOU READ?

Did you note the comparisons?

1. **Mrs. Zwilich's comparison of the growth of a composer with the growth of a tree is a**
   - **A** simile
   - **B** personification
   - **C** pun
   - **D** metaphor

2. **Mrs. Zwilich compares the beginning of a new composition to the**
   - **A** evolution of a drama
   - **B** armature of a sculptor
   - **C** construction of a skyscraper
   - **D** All of the above

3. **The author suggests that, compared to the common image of a composer, Zwilich is more**
   - **A** reclusive and eccentric
   - **B** neurotic and conceited
   - **C** outgoing and modest
   - **D** logical and intellectual

Can you draw the right conclusion?

4. **Zwilich seems to think that classical composers should be**
   - **A** better known by the public than they now are
   - **B** compensated better than they presently are
   - **C** given more support by the federal government
   - **D** more productive than they presently are

5. **From the description of Zwilich's high school work, the reader can conclude that she probably was a**
   - **A** bright student with only minor interest in music
   - **B** single-minded student who concentrated only on classical music
   - **C** disinterested student until she discovered Mozart
   - **D** versatile student with several interests

6. **We can conclude from the article that Zwilich's style is**
   - **A** vaguely similar to others' but uniquely her own
   - **B** romantic in the manner of Mozart and Beethoven
   - **C** exceptionally similar to Aaron Copland's
   - **D** unlike any other composer's

7. **Zwilich felt that the death of her husband influenced her to**
   - **A** appreciate her special talents even more
   - **B** cherish life more than ever
   - **C** create music he would have liked
   - **D** take a six-month break from composing

Did you note the author's style?

8. **The author acquaints the reader with Zwilich mainly by**
   - **A** using a series of direct quotations
   - **B** comparing her with other famous composers
   - **C** relating several humorous incidents
   - **D** describing her personality and music in detail

How carefully did you read?

9. **After the death of her husband, Zwilich became less concerned with technique and more concerned with**
   - **A** harmonies
   - **B** variety
   - **C** meaning
   - **D** length

10. **Zwilich contends that composers are similar to playwrights in that**
    - **A** their work is first committed to paper
    - **B** the works of both are meant to be heard aloud
    - **C** the compositions of both are always the result of intense mental activity
    - **D** their creations themselves turn around to influence the creator

LEARN ABOUT WORDS

A. Often you can tell the meaning of a word from its context—the words around it.

Directions: Find the word in the paragraph that means

1. mental processes operating just below full awareness *(2)*
2. unfinished room just under a roof; loft *(3)*
3. sharpened; refined *(5)*
4. distinctive; very unusual *(5)*
5. quiet and slow-moving *(5)*
6. severe test *(13)*
7. composing; creating on the spur of the moment *(14)*
8. causes; brings forth *(15)*
9. beginning; origin *(17)*
10. full and impressive sounds *(17)*

B. A word may have more than one meaning. Its meaning depends on the way it is used.

Directions: Decide which meaning fits the word as it is used in the paragraph. Write the letter that stands before the meaning you choose.

11. branches *(1)*
    - **A** divisions of a river
    - **B** secondary shoots or stems of a plant
    - **C** divisions of an organization

12. open *(3)*
    - **A** frank; unreserved
    - **B** exposed; uncovered
    - **C** unfilled; still available

13. general *(4)*
    - **A** vague; not detailed
    - **B** high ranking; holding superior rank
    - **C** common; not special

14. mediums *(5)*
    - **A** things in a middle position
    - **B** go-betweens; intermediaries
    - **C** modes of artistic expression

15. characters *(16)*
    - **A** eccentric persons
    - **B** persons in a drama
    - **C** letters of the alphabet

C. *multi* (many; more than two; many times more than)
mega (large; great; powerful; a million times)
omni (all; every)

A knowledge of these **prefixes** will provide you with a key to the meaning of many unfamiliar words.

Directions: Use the prefix *multi-, mega-,* or *omni-* to complete each word so that it fits the definition. Write the word.

16. _____phone (large, cone-shaped device for magnifying the voice)
17. _____cycle (one million cycles, as in radio)
18. _____present (existing everywhere)
19. _____ply (cause to increase in number)
20. _____lomania (delusions of grandeur and power)
21. _____scient (knowing everything)
22. _____ton (force equal to the explosion of a million tons of TNT)
23. _____millionaire (a millionaire many times over)
24. _____tude (a crowd of many persons)

D. An **idiom** is a phrase or expression that has an accepted meaning different from its literal meaning. Idioms have various origins; many have entered current speech from the language peculiar to an occupation, profession, locality, or sport.

Directions: The idioms in column II are some of the many which originated on farms or in rural areas. Write the idiom that corresponds with each definition in column I.

I	II
25. to be master	put the cart before the horse
26. precipitating heavily	rule the roost
27. tend to one's own affairs	come home to roost
28. a difficult task or situation	have all one's eggs in one basket
29. not having chosen a side	plow a lonely furrow
30. have all one's interests concentrated on one thing	raining pitchforks
31. proceed on a course alone	on the fence
32. do things backward	hard row to hoe
33. have repercussion; boomerang	hoe one's own row