

**This interview with
ELLEN TAAFFE ZWILICH
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 12, 2023**



Ellen Taaffe Zwilich

Library of Congress: Tell us about your upbringing.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich: I was born in Miami. I was there for my youth, basically. And I started making up things at the piano when I was very, very small. I remember I was a toddler and I climbed on the piano bench and I found out what happened when you pressed down on the keys. And a part of me has never gotten off that bench as a toddler, you know?

Nobody in my family actually played the piano. Well, my mother played a couple of little tunes, but that was it. But I just got absolutely taken with, with music, as a little, little kid.

I started studying piano at five and I just really didn't like the music that the teacher gave me. And I said, "I know there's better music than this." And I had heard a few things of Mozart and Beethoven and I thought, "My goodness, what is she giving me to play?"

I ended up being fired by my piano teacher because I didn't want to do what she wanted me to do.

I went to a high school in Miami. They had a fabulous music program, which is not there today. The whole-- all of that has just gone south. I got to play trumpet in the band and I got to play violin in the orchestra. I got to be concert master of the orchestra. I got to be one of the first trumpets in the band. I learned everything by ear early on.

I didn't know I had what you call absolute pitch until I was in the 10th grade and I found out that I needed to transpose my trumpet part.

We even had a behind-the-screen audition, so they didn't know if you were a girl or a boy when you were auditioning. And I got to write music and conduct and, you know, it was just a really, really, an amazing experience. And it's just regretful to me: young people don't have that in Florida now. It's a shame and in most parts of the country, it's sort of gone away.

LC: Where did you go to college?

ETZ: I went to Tallahassee, Florida State University. It had a wonderful College of Music. Still does. I have a little relationship with it now.

And, when I was in college, I was playing jazz trumpet. And I was playing violin, of course, in the orchestra.

There was a conductor who became a big, big supporter of mine. It was just really wonderful. I had all kinds of stuff outside of just the normal curriculum in college. And then I decided to move to New York. I wanted to be a better violinist, so I studied with Ivan Galamian.

It's very interesting, even at Florida State, jazz was not part of the curriculum when I was there. Now it is. I mean, I think the thing for me is that I've always written for people. I wrote something for my high school band. It's like I was a part of that family, so to speak. I always did that. When I was in college, I wrote my first pieces.

I was always writing music for people to play and even before I started to have any kind of a career, when I was first in New York, I would get a couple of part-time jobs teaching, and one of them was rather interesting because I got to write something for the kids.

When I taught at Hunter College High School, one year there was a girl who really wanted to be a choreographer, and so I wrote something for her and recorded it and she choreographed for it. My whole life I've been writing something for people to perform.

That was a big thing for me. And the same thing at Juilliard. When I was writing something in Juilliard, it was always for somebody that I knew.

You know, you talk about the woman thing. I keep saying it just happened. I'm not a trailblazer. I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, so many times in my life, like when I was in high school, I was there when they had this wonderful program that gave me a marvelous sort of underpinning. By the time I got to New York, Stokowski had started the American Symphony a couple of years before that and the American Symphony was a professional orchestra playing big concerts that had Black people, women, Asians in the orchestra. That was unusual at a time when most professional orchestras were white European males. So, I mean, I just kind of stepped onto the stage at the right moment. You know, it's like bizarre, but very nice.

I'm always writing thinking of the players. I want to feel the players sitting right there with me, even if I don't know them--like when I'm thinking of an orchestra, I don't know everybody in that orchestra, but I like to feel a player there, you know, waiting for my piece.

LC: The work, the performance, being added to the Registry is performed by David Shifrin. Can you tell us how his involvement came about?

ETZ: David Shifrin. Yes, sir, oh, yes! He had already performed my clarinet and string quartet piece, this was commissioned for him by the Arlene and Milton Berkman Fund. At that time, David was the artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. And so they, they gave him like a birthday present, commissioning a piece.

I'm not sure how I got chosen, but I got chosen and it was wonderful. The recording is by Chamber Music Northwest, which David runs now, and it was 13 performers. It's on Delos Records.

I knew how it was going to sound. I knew his sound. I had it in my head. I still do. But the other thing is that I have always spent time talking with the performers, particularly soloists, that are going to be doing a piece of mine and learning about things that they were thinking and what they feel is missing from the repertoire, what they like and all of this kind of thing.

I always want to know how they feel. I always say, "Tell me the things in the repertoire you love and tell me things that you hate and I'll never tell anybody what you said." It's just fascinating to me. So I spent time with David before I even started the piece, getting, you know, all kinds of feedback from him.

I think of musical instruments as creatures. You've got to get to know them, and they're each quite individual and have individual colors and ways of moving and this and that. It's fascinating. I love it.

LC: How long did it take you to compose the piece?

ETZ: Honestly, I don't remember. I always allow plenty of time because there are things that go fast, you know, that just hop off and then there are things that go slowly before they get really, really moving. So I always allow an enormous amount of time....

I go to my first rehearsal with my eraser for anything that needs to get changed or fixed or removed or anything like that... you need an accent here and you don't have it. You know, you need a diminuendo there. Just really little things. And maybe you've used a word the performers don't relate to. So you change the word, you know. I always like this back and forth with the performers.

For this work, the core of this piece, I had finished the first movement and I had plans for a three movement piece and it was just after that that 9/11 happened and, of course, I was knocked off my chair for a while--and when I got back to the piece that I was working on, I was different and my piece had decided it was going to go in a different direction.

I kind of struggled with that and then I realized I was being pushed by the music to do this second movement. And so I finally decided, I said, “Well, you know, if it doesn't really fit with the rest of the piece, I'll just finish this movement. I'll give it to David as a birthday present or something.”

And by the time I got to the end of the movement, which is now called “Elegy,” I went back and analyzed that movement and the first movement, and I realized that the second movement had actually grown out of the initial material of the first movement.

I think sometimes, with music, it's like DNA where something starts and it can blossom this way or that way and grow into this, grow into that. And so it really was a continuation of the same piece. And, as I said, I didn't know that until I finished the movement and then went back and really analyzed it.

It was just coming out of me. I just had to say it, you know? And then of course, I needed a third movement, and then I needed a fourth movement to kind of make peace with it, you know? What can I say?

When I wrote it, I noticed that the first movement was like New York, busy, everybody going around and getting things done. And, then, of course, the second movement is [about] 9/11. The other two movements are essentially kind of getting back on track.

It's fascinating. I mean, we don't know what music is, where it comes from in our brain and all of that. I mean, I think it involves the entire human--the brain, the gut, the heart, the soul. It's a mysterious thing. And even at my age, I sort of still feel like I'm on a voyage of discovery. It's not that I have mastered something and then I do it again or something. No, I'm always discovering something when I'm working, and I do love this kind of concept of getting initial material that will possibility evolve in really different ways. And if I have a plan for a piece, and as I'm writing it, if the piece does something different, I will throw away the plan and go with the piece.

I kind of cite the playwright Edward Albee [who said about his play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?”], you can create George and Martha and they can be exactly what you want them to be in the opening of your play. But after they have a little while in there, there are certain things he wouldn't say to her. You’ve got to listen to your characters as opposed to enforcing something on them.

Then the other example I like is the acorn. You know, who is the first person that looked at this acorn and says, “Oh, this is going to be a giant oak tree,” but all the information necessary to make that giant oak tree is in that little acorn.

I mean I do do a lot of analysis, but the music seems to run way outside of that, and that's mysterious, it's mysterious to me.

I mean, if you've created a character, it's got a life of its own. And if you've created a musical idea, it's got a life of its own. And so you've got to relate to that. And as I said, instead of imposing your idea on this, you've got to listen. You gotta listen.