

**The following interview with  
DAVID SHIFRIN  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on May 10, 2023**



*David Shifrin*

**Library of Congress: Growing up, who were clarinet heroes?**

David Shifrin: The first one was Benny Goodman, without a doubt. He was the reason that I took up the clarinet. I saw a movie about him, Hollywood's "Benny Goodman's Story," and I was so taken with that, I wanted to play the clarinet. So definitely Benny Goodman and a lot of the great jazz players--Jimmy Hamilton and Barney Bigard, Artie Shaw. And then orchestrally, my teacher, Anthony Gigliotti, who was principal in the Philadelphia Orchestra, and Robert Marcellus, who was the principal player in the Cleveland Orchestra, were both mentors and a role models. So those are some of the heroes. There are many more....

**LC: Who would you consider your conducting heroes?**

DS: Well, I have to say Stokowski because, as a young kid, I got to play in his orchestra and that was a great thrill for me. But I was tremendously influenced by George Szell, even though I didn't play with him. I played in his orchestra shortly after he passed away and played with all the musicians that he had trained. So those were my two heroes, two rather different mindsets and approaches to orchestral sound.

**LC: If you could give one piece of advice to a composer wanting to write for clarinet...**

DS: I always say, "Write what you want to write and I'll try to play it" but then, as a caveat, I'll also say, "But if you can make it sound really hard but actually be quite easy,..." *[laughs]*. So somewhere in between. I don't want the composer to feel limited by the instrumental kind of cliché characteristics. But I really want the composer to write the piece that they hear and that they feel.

**LC: If you could give one piece of advice to someone just starting on clarinet....**

DS: Work with a teacher to get an instrument and a setup that you don't have to fight, where you can get a sound easily. And then remember that it is a wind instrument and you have to learn to use your wind the way a violinist uses their bow and the way a singer uses their wind, their

voice, which is why it's so important to start out with good foundational basics of tone production and then just take it where it will go.

**LC: What age were you when you first took up the clarinet and was that your first instrument?**

DS: Clarinet was my first instrument and I think I was nine or 10 years old when I started. I had some friends from my neighborhood with whom I played street football and all kinds of other things and it was revealed that two of them played musical instruments, a cellist and a flutist. And so, one day, I went over to visit their home and they played for me and I thought that was just marvelous. So that was the seed that made me think I wanted to play an instrument. And then I saw the Benny Goodman story, and I went to the local public school music teacher and asked for lessons and it really became my passion.

I grew up in Queens, New York. And the public school system had a very strong music program in those days.

**LC: How did you come to record this piece for Delos?**

DS: There are two elements--my association with Ellen Zwilich and my association with Delos records.

I began recording through Delos in the very early 1980s when I was living in Los Angeles. Delos was founded in Los Angeles and I was principal clarinetist of the LA Chamber Orchestra and we did many orchestral recordings for Delos. Gerard Schwartz was the conductor and he, at the time, was also music director of the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York and I was performing with Mostly Mozart, the Mozart Clarinet Concerto, and it's actually Jerry who arranged that we would record for Delos in New York with Mostly Mozart. And so that began more of my solo relationship between me and Delos and we subsequently must have done at least 10 or 12 more records over the year.

And I became acquainted with Ellen Zwilich just through hearing her chamber music at Lincoln Center and elsewhere and hearing some of her concertos that she had written for wind instruments. She had written a bassoon concerto and an oboe concerto and all these brass concerti. And before I was able to ask her to write a concerto, I was in an enviable position, I would say, of being artistic director of the festival in Portland, Oregon--Chamber Music Northwest--and then an artist and then subsequently artistic director of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, both organizations being very active in commissioning new music. And so we formed kind of a consortium between the two organizations and I was able to invite a number of composers to write a quintet for clarinet and string quartet, which was also subsequently recorded on Delos.

And Ellen and I began a close association after that. And we were both aware that among her many concertos, she hadn't written one for clarinet and then at the time of my 50th birthday, which was a while ago, my cousin Arlene Berkman who headed a charitable foundation, wanted to give a nod to my birthday and my career and said that they'd like to commission a piece in my honor, and who would you like to do it? And I said, "Well, for years I've wanted Ellen Zwilich to write a concerto." We were able to organize that on a number of levels where we did the world premiere with a chamber ensemble at Lincoln Center.

Subsequently, we played at quite a few places and with larger orchestras. We gave the full orchestra premiere with a Buffalo Philharmonic and Joanne Falletta about a year or so later.

We made the Delos recording at a live performance at Chamber Music Northwest in 2012 with an all-star group of musicians. The piece took on special significance, partly because of the period during which it was written.

**LC: Yes, a movement in the piece was inspired by 9/11. What was its effect on you when you first came to perform it?**

DS: Well, I had some idea of what to expect because I was in touch with Ellen all during the creation of the piece [but] it did take a turn partway through. Just to give you an idea, there's Ellen's thorough preparation in writing for any instrument. Ellen even asked me to send copies of the etude and method books I had used when I first learned to play! We spent hours talking about the repertoire that I admire, and I remember specifically talking about Carl Nielsen's clarinet concerto, which has a major part for the snare drum and just the juxtaposition of the clarinet as a brilliant instrument and egged on by this drum. I planted that seed in Ellen's mind and she made quite an effective use of percussion in this concerto. And she asked me, "What's missing in your repertoire?" And I said, "Well, the clarinet didn't really exist during most of the Baroque era." And what really appealed to me was to have a baroque aria possibly akin to a concerto adagio or a Cantata aria of Bach. And so the slow movement was initially modeled after that. And then the whole piece took a real turn because this was during, ... we started collaborating in the winter of 2001.

And she got ... we had all of these conversations and she was actively writing the piece during the summer of 2001. It was her main focus at that time, and I think she had pretty much completed the first movement and had begun sketches for the second movement when the attacks, on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon ... occurred on September 11th, and she stopped writing for a while and then the piece took a very different turn and became the aria I had asked for ... I think it became more of an elegy.

And then the third movement came back to the idea of virtuosity. And there were lighthearted virtuosic elements to the third movement finale, but with a really driving intensity. So, the whole concerto is really of its time, of the time surrounding September 11, 2001.

**LC: There's many things to admire in Ellen's composing. What do you admire the most?**

DS: Oh, there's so many things! The music is well constructed and while it's intuitive for a performer and a listener, it's still full of surprises and innovative sounds. Her sense of orchestration and her sense of what a performer will go through to play the music is spot on and I think it's helped by the fact that she was a very active and accomplished violinist and knows what it's like from the other side of the page.