There are not many composers in the modern world who possess the fortunate combination of writing music of substance and, at the same time, exercising an immediate appeal to mixed audiences. Composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich offers purely technical excellence and a distinct power of communication. With originality, skill and versatility, special rhythmic energy of her music combined with a concern for large-scale structure, pungent orchestral colors and a uniquely idiomatic flair for instrumental writing, Zwilich’s music is distinctive not only for its superb craftsmanship, but also for its wit, lyricism and sheer beauty, making it immediately appealing to listeners.

Originally from Miami, Florida, Zwilich studied composition with John Boda and violin with Richard Burgin at Florida State University and was thriving in her progressive Miami environment where auditions for her school orchestra were already being conducted behind a screen to avoid bias. This modern-day attitude, pervasive in the life of this female composer, began during a time when the merits of women in music—despite their abilities—were still underrepresented. She then moved to New York where she continued her violin studies with Ivan Galamian and then played with the American Symphony Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski, which allowed her a firsthand experience of the subtleties that fall between score and performance.

Zwilich then studied composition at the Juilliard School of Music with Roger Sessions and Elliott Carter, two of the most famous American composers of the 20th century both known for their experimentation with Schoenberg’s 12-tone system and became the first woman in Juilliard’s history to graduate with a degree in composition.
A prolific composer in virtually all media, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich has created a handful of exquisitely honed works, which have been performed by most of the leading American orchestras and by major ensembles abroad. Her music first came to public attention when Pierre Boulez conducted her “Symposium for Orchestra” at Juilliard (1975) when he was director of the New York Philharmonic, but it was the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for the “Symphony No. 1,” premiered by the American Composers Orchestra in 1982, conducted by Gunther Schuller that brought her instantly into international focus. She was commissioned to work on two more symphonies, for the San Francisco Symphony and for the New York Philharmonic’s 150th anniversary. From 1995-99, she was the first occupant of the Composer’s Chair at Carnegie Hall. While there, she created the “Making Music” concert series, which focuses on performances and lectures by living composers.

Zwilich received many honors for her compositions, including the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Chamber Music Prize, the Arturo Toscanini Music Critics Award, an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the Ernst von Dohnányi Citation, Alfred I. Dupont Award, Miami Performing Arts Center Award, the Medaglia d’oro in the G.B. Viotti Competition, the NPR and WNYC Gotham Award for her contributions to the musical life of New York City, four Grammy nominations and was a 1994 inductee into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. She was named Composer of the Year in 1999 by "Musical America” and has served as the Francis Eppes Distinguished Professor at Florida State University. She was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2004 and has received six honorary doctorates.

Zwilich also has been the subject of two cartoons in the late Charles Schulz’s celebrated Peanuts series. The acclaimed “Peanuts Gallery” special has aired hundreds of times nationwide since its 2006 PBS debut and continues to be rebroadcast.

Zwilich’s compositional style is marked by an obsession with the idea of generating a large-scale structure, melodic and harmonic language, and developmental processes from its initial motives. Some of her work had been written for her husband, violinist Joseph Zwilich, who played in the orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera. He suddenly died in 1979, after which Taaffe Zwilich refocused her compositional efforts on communicating more directly with performers and listeners, softening her sterile intellectualism to a more emotional and personal style of writing. She was eventually reclassified in the music press as a “neo-romantic” or a “neo-classicist” and found herself being compared to Ravel and Schubert.

Her ”Clarinet Concerto” (written 2002-2003) for solo clarinet and orchestra was commissioned by the Arlene and Dr. Milton D. Berkman Philanthropic Fund for the clarinetist David Shifrin. The piece is dedicated to him, and he first performed it with 12 members of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Alice Tully Hall under JoAnn Falletta on September 12, 2003.

In the fall of 2001, Zwilich had already outlined the first movement of her Clarinet Concerto and was about to begin work on the second movement when two planes hit the World Trade Center in New York on September 11. She therefore decided for the second movement to become “Elegy: September 11.” Highly energetic, Klezmer-like clarinet melodies communicate here
with the strings and brass. The clarinet laments the tragic circumstances, interrupted by a gong, followed by lower strings and sad clarinet notes. Fast rhythms in strings and horns lead to a climax contrasted by high scales in the clarinet and violins. A piercing sound is followed by a low and solemn ending.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s “Clarinet Concerto” lasts for about 28 minutes and contains four movements, only the second of which is titled. A small orchestra consisting of flute, oboe, bassoon, two horns, cornet, percussion, and strings accompanies the clarinet. It would have been quite a different piece had not the catastrophic news hit on the fatal date just when she was about to start work on the second movement. She uses the most skillful application and development of the musical materials—a score truly inspired by a tragic event and one that is likely to transcend it.

At a time when the musical offerings of the world are more varied than ever before, few composers have emerged with the unique personality of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. Her music is widely known because it is performed, recorded, broadcast, and—above all—listened to and liked by different audiences throughout the world. Like the great masters, Zwilich produces music that is immediately recognized as her own. In her compositions, Ms. Zwilich’s unique musical voice combines craft and inspiration, reflecting an optimistic and humanistic spirit.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.