

Chicago Sinfonietta

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Ladies' Choice

Notes by John Glover

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To begin a program titled "Ladies' Choice" with a work by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich is fitting. One of the foremost composers of our time, she opens a program filled with women composers and musicians working at the pinnacle of their art. From early on in childhood Zwilich played the piano, violin, trumpet, and composed. Born and raised in Miami Florida, she took the plunge and moved to New York City to play violin with the American Symphony Orchestra and teach. She eventually pursued a Ph.D in composition at Julliard, becoming the first woman to earn the degree. Widespread attention of her work as a composer followed another first: in 1983 Ellen Taaffe Zwilich became the first woman composer to receive the Pulitzer Prize in music for her *Three Movements for Orchestra (Symphony No. 1)* which was premiered by her "home team" the American Symphony Orchestra.

The work heard on this program, *Prologue and Variations for Orchestra*, is characteristic of Zwilich's style, particularly in its formal construction. As in many of her works she is keenly interested in generating an entire musical composition from its opening material. Always refraining from obvious or predictable choices, Zwilich's piece cleverly manipulates the opening melodic gesture of the work. Its pleading minor seconds and melodic leaps are dissected, transformed, and reconfigured with innumerable surprises. It could be said that exploration is at the heart of Zwilich's work as a composer, both in her career and in individual pieces. She has written works in nearly every medium available to her and has garnered a secure place in the musical culture of the 21st century with both musicians and audiences alike. Her thoughts are perhaps best expressed in her own words in an interview given in Music Associates of America: "So far I have been happiest with the concept of evolving as a composer, rather than making abrupt shifts in viewpoint. My sense of music grows out of myself and I have always moved in an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, way. There have been points in my life, for one reason or another, of fairly dramatic changes and these may be reflected in my music. I'm more interested in the moment and the future, but I think there is a rhythm to what I do, balancing things I know with things that are new for me. I don't like getting too comfortable." The result is music of startling ingenuity and directness.

A unique figure in the French musical scene at the turn of the century, Augusta Holmes has remained for some time an unfairly obscure composer. Only one biography of her life exists in English, a 1983 Ph.D Thesis by Nancy Theeman titled "The Life and Songs of Augusta Holmes". Holmes was born in Paris in 1847 to a retired Irish army captain and an English painter and poet. She grew up in Versailles where she studied counterpoint and harmony with Henri Lambert, organist of the Versailles cathedral, and orchestration with Hyecinth Klose who directed the Regimental Band. From a young age Holmes was writing for and conducting the wind band, giving her a very unique musical upbringing. As a result her orchestrations stand out from musical contemporaries such as Debussy and Saint-Saëns for her idiosyncratic use of wind instruments in orchestral works.

Holmes' work *Irlande, Poeme Symphonique* certainly bears testament to her early wind band experiences. The opening of the piece is a lengthy solo for the clarinet, twisting and turning with a bit of an Irish lilt. The entire orchestra then joins in, but the textures remain heavily dominated by the wind section. The closing of the work sounds every bit like an English wind band symphony. Its orchestration, with widely spaced brass chords and an accompanying bass drum and cymbal, has a certain pomp more typical of the English composer Gustav Holst rather than her French contemporaries. A composer of operas, symphonies, and songs Holmes held a place of respect in the vibrant music scene of Paris at the turn of the century. Unfairly pushed into obscurity, some of her orchestral music has now been recorded and perhaps she will finally regain her rightful place within the musical cannon.

Two of the works on this program were penned by the guest conductor and composer Tania Leòn. Like Ellen Taaffe Zwilich and Chen Yi, Leòn is one of the great musical artists working in music today and has received many of the highest honors awarded to a composer. Born in Havana, Cuba in the 1940's, her heritage is a mixture of French, Spanish, Chinese, and African. All of these influences have found a voice in her music. She herself notes that her "ancestors came from different parts of the world; they came from different cultures. I take pride in the heritage each of them passed on to me, and I represent all of them within myself. I prefer to be an inclusive human being." Vibrant clashing dissonances give rise to beautifully luxurious chords. Often a wild and pulsing rhythm exists, sometimes boiling just beneath the surface of the music.

The first of Leòn's works on the program is *Kabiosille*, a dazzling work for piano and orchestra. Opening with an explosive cadenza-like passage for the solo piano, the orchestra follows closely behind. Except for a few bars here and there, the pianist plays throughout the entire work promising the soloist a real workout. Riotous outbursts from the orchestra alternate with quieter accompanimental gestures, closing the work with a cadenza-like passage similar to the opening and a final surprising gesture from the entire ensemble. The title *Kabiosille* is an Afro-Cuban spelling of the Yorba word "kabiyesi" which means "Hail to your Majesty". The word is associated with the god Shango, also known as Jakuta, who is found in the mythology of many cultures in Latin America. The father of the sky and god of thunder and lightning, Leòn's brash rhythms and rough chords suit the god, and the title of the work, perfectly.

Leòn's orchestral work *Horizons* displays a very different side of her musical language. The crystalline dissonances and warm major and minor chords remain, but the intensity and brashness of *Kabiosille* is nowhere to be found. The work seems to move and breath organically, subtly evading the tether of a steady rhythmic pulse. Instead the music opts for a spacious sound in which instruments appear and vanish in surprising and seemingly improvisatory passages. Unlike *Kabiosille* the work begins with a quiet stillness from which orchestral sparks and flashes emerge. The work drifts away with an equal sense of stillness as a lone clarinet solo plays over chiming ostinato patterns in the harp, piano, and bongos.

Written towards the end of his life, when his energies had turned almost exclusively to vocal music, Franz Joseph Haydn's *Trumpet Concerto in E-flat Major* is the last of the mere seventeen instrumental concerti in the composers' catalog of works. This number is staggeringly

small when compared to the twenty-seven concerti his colleague Mozart wrote for the piano, let alone other instruments. Long-time court composer for the Esterházy family, Haydn was never as interested in the virtuosic fireworks that Mozart often relied on for his self-produced concerts. As a result Haydn's music, while filled with brilliant musical invention, often carries with it a simplicity and grace which sounds much easier to play than it truly is. The *Trumpet Concerto* is no exception.

The work was commissioned in 1795 by Anton Wendinger, a trumpeter with the Vienna Court Orchestra. Wendinger had perfected the "organized" trumpet, an instrument which filled in the chromatic notes that were unavailable to a player when playing on the natural trumpet. The conventional trumpet of his time, natural trumpets rely on the harmonic series and are comparatively restrictive as to what notes can be played. By having the full chromatic range, the trumpet could finally play more than mere orchestral punctuations and instead take the spotlight as a melodic instrument. A work full of the wit and imagination so characteristic of Haydn, there is never a dull moment in the concerto as it takes full advantage of the melodic freedom that Wendinger had achieved with the new instrument, a precursor of the modern valve trumpet played in orchestras today.

The program closes with Chen Yi's *Ge Xu (Antiphony)*. Like Zwilich, Yi is a woman of "firsts" She wrote the first Chinese Viola Concerto (*Xian Shi*) in 1983 and became the first woman in China to receive a Masters degree in composition from the Beijing Conservatory in 1986. Her work is deeply informed by the folk music and cultural landscape of her native China. Growing up practicing the music of Bach and other Western composers on the violin, she was forced to play in secret when the Cultural Revolution overtook China in the 1960's. No longer able to study western music openly, she would practice at home with a mute on her violin. Eventually she was forced to work at labor camps in the countryside for two years, which resulted in firsthand experience with the folk melodies and musical traditions of her culture. At the age of 17, with the restrictive bans of the Revolution lifted, she was able to return to her home city and serve as concertmaster and resident composer of the Beijing Opera Troupe.

The title of the work, *Antiphony*, indicates a style of singing in which two semi-independent choirs interact by singing alternating musical phrases. The most common instance of this "call and response" music in Western culture occurs in church music. Chen Yi's work is inspired by the Zhang minority people in Southern China and their celebration of the Chinese lunar New Year. In her preface to the score she describes their gathering in the fields to sing mountain songs in antiphonal forms. Distinct groups or individual singers make up texts in the style of antithetical couplets in a kind of competition going back and forth. *Ge Xu (Antiphony)* behaves this way as well. Opening with a single musical phrase high in the violins, the work proceeds as several distinct musical ideas are traded back and forth by different members of the orchestra, occasionally sounding against each other in direct competition. Chen Yi's preface closes saying that this antiphonal folk singing inspired her to write music which keeps "the high spirit and ideal hope alive".

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