Judith Lang Zaimont: Part I, Profile

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Take a brilliant and inquisitive mind, add performing and creative musical talent, then layer it with unquenchable energy and unflagging confidence, and the result is Judith Lang Zaimont. Realizing early her good fortune to have grown up in a locale as culture-minded as New York City, five-year-old Judith relentlessly pestered her mother, a fine piano teacher, for lessons. Three years later she was performing in public, and three years after that she was winning prizes, to the extent that at age eleven she was flown out to California to perform on the popular Lawrence Welk Show. By the next year she had won a scholarship to the Juilliard School’s preparatory division, studying with Rosina Lhevinne and Leland Thompson, and about this time Judith began composing and soon was winning prizes for her original work. The prelude to her life, with its pattern of diligence, musical sensitivity, and fearlessness, all infused with exuberance, already indicated the “musical woman” Judith was to become.

While at Juilliard and barely into their teens, Judith and her sister Doris were paired as a duo-piano team under professional management; Judith was one of several composers who arranged and composed for the duo.1 Their concert calendar included performances around the US, radio and TV appearances, a Carnegie Hall debut in 1963 with the Little Orchestra Society in Carnival of the Animals, a two-season association with the TV Mitch Miller Show and the Concert for Two Pianos recording, which included US premieres of works by Poulenc and Casadesus.

At age sixteen Judith entered Queens College. Although the program only offered a general music major with no particular sub-concentration, she took theory classes with George Perle, Hugo Weisgal, and Leo Kraft, and studied Schenkerian analysis with Felix Salzer. Though she wasn’t able to study composition there, after graduating magna cum laude at age twenty with a fistful of music prizes, a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and an Anton Seidl Fellowship allowed her to enter Columbia University, where her only formal composition lessons took place with Jack Beeson and Otto Luening. Completing a master’s degree in composition at age twenty-two, she later was awarded the Debussy Fellowship from the Alliance française to study orchestration for a year in Paris with André Jolivet.

Her career is studded with prizes and awards. As the oldest child in a family of quite modest means, the only way to move forward in her chosen field was to go head-to-head with other talented composers in the most open and competitive environments in order to gain notice and to obtain funding for her work—and to do this often and regularly. It is not surprising, then, to find her dossier replete with accolades, many of which are recent; for example, those at the start of the new millennium include Honored Composer in the 2001 Van Cliburn Competition, Aaron Copland Award in 2003, Bush Foundation Fellowship in 2005, Featured Composer at Eastman’s 2009 annual new-music festival, and two national First Prizes for chamber music and one of three American Prizes for Orchestral Music in 2012. Her website, www.jzaimont.com, contains a selected list of her honors over time, including grants from the two National Endowments as both composer and author (The Musical Woman, vol. III).

Her natural confidence makes Zaimont a born teacher, and her thirty-six years in academia include being named “Teacher of the Year” at Peabody Conservatory along the way. The demands she places on herself as composer and as performer she also places on herself as an educator. Studying with her is part-philosophy, part-nurturing, and all about craft. Inspiration, she believes, arises in significant ways from deep knowledge of a medium, and from defining for oneself the parameters governing how to construct the problem the piece intends to solve. She equally stresses her many editorial visits with a piece in various developmental stages so that the work can be made “ever finer, more striking, more original.”2 She elicits from her students beyond what they consider possible: “You either rise up to snuff, or you break. You must always continue to match an international standard of excellence.”3

Following her career as professor at Queens College, Peabody Conservatory of Music (Johns Hopkins University), chair of the music department at Adelphi University, and overseeing the composition program at the University of Minnesota School of Music, Zaimont moved to Maricopa, Arizona in 2005. Here she set up a quiet place where she could focus on her composition and “set out to write pieces [she] needed to write, even if they weren’t commissioned.” Even if they weren’t commissioned! For many composers, not being commissioned is a matter of course, but Zaimont’s talent and determination to succeed is so well known that she can start on a piece, knowing it will ultimately receive a commission no later than mid-project. As she points out, she never writes just for the premiere or one set of...
performers at one specific time: “If I am not writing something I firmly believe will be a durable and prime addition to repertoire, I won’t even begin work on the piece.”

Her music is attractive and well-formed, the thorny sections compelling, and the accessible music setting the mind to contemplative journeys, and she herself sees it as always tonally moored in some fashion. More than one critical writer, considering the original and expanded chromatic lattice, invention in form, and many-layered construction, has termed her style “Romantic Modernism.” A large number of recordings of her works are available on the web as CDs, mp3 downloads, and YouTube videos, which pair husband Gary Zaimont’s artwork with Judith’s compositions.

When asked about pieces she considers her “signature works,” Zaimont replies that the “pieces that are most me are often my first try in writing in that genre.” Among these she includes SONATA for piano (1999); the second piano trio, ZONES (1985); Elegy from her Second Symphony (2001); Growler, from the Wind Symphony (2003); Saxophone Quartet (1999); the dance symphony Hidden Heritage (1987); the cantata Parable – A Tale of Abram and Isaac (1986); and String Quartet “The Figure” (2007). The Quartet is cited by the composer as a recent example of one of her most representative works. The opening of movement one, “In Shadow,” sets forth the work’s central musical figure (see Example 1). Her current project is Pure, Cool (Water) – Symphony No. 4, a five-movement work, now in its final phases of preparation, which explores the differing naturally-occurring states of water. The 2014 Sorel Commission has already been awarded to this symphony, a major commissioning grant from the Elizabeth and Michel Sorel Charitable Organization, Inc. Since her compositions in their original versions are done entirely in pen and paper, the cost for calligraphy to prepare the symphony’s published version is covered through a successful crowdsourced project undertaken through www.unitedstatesartists.org.

Just as she is a teacher, so is Zaimont a student: At times she undertakes self-study projects prior to composing; for example, before she wrote SONATA she played through and charted all the development sections from every Beethoven piano sonata movement cast in true sonata form. Her purpose was to check the proportion of developments in relation to that of their surrounding expositions and recapitulations. What makes for good balance, satisfying proportion? She quotes from Of Beauty by Francis Bacon: “There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.” Strangeness of course means “distinction, specificity,” the non generic. In a moment of curiosity about her response to two other composers’ works (“fascinating, but boring”), Zaimont studied these composers’ scores to see if she could detect the problems (one with a glacially slow harmonic rhythm, and one with a flow without beat). She then wrote Stillness, an eighteen-minute poem for orchestra. Boring? Not if you believe the critic who wrote, “A highly rewarding work that engages the interest of the listener throughout.” Driven by “great faith in the quality” of what she writes, she is clear that you have to “appreciate what others have

I. In Shadow

Judith Lang Zaimont

Example 1. String Quartet “The Figure,” movement 1, “In Shadow”
done before you,” and “you must feel you can add to the genre.”

Zaimont continues to teach and to adjudicate composition competitions. This past year, after judging an international choral composition competition and the national finals of an orchestral composition contest, she came away from both a bit discouraged. “I love difference in music, something that is fresh, new, distinct.” But what she found was “a sea change—we seem to have gone beyond music manuscripts. She remarked, “I like people who take chances and don’t mine a garden that’s already been planted for centuries.”

Growing up as a collaborative pianist and performer, Zaimont is a composer who requires her performers to bring their selves to the music, to really dig beneath the dots. She continues to speak of the ink continuing to flow, even after decades of performing Zaimont’s music, and after decades of measuring density.

Composing remains a daily activity for Zaimont: “I write 364 days a year, except for Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement.” As a young mother in the 1980s she would grab moments when the house was quiet and closet herself in the basement with a desk and piano, composing sometimes until two in the morning. “Everybody’s busy,” she says, noting that Archimedes was in his bath when he came up with his method of measuring density.

And the ink continues to flow, even beyond music manuscripts. She blogs. Her books include the well-known three-volume series The Musical Woman: An International Perspective (Greenwood Press, 1994, 1987, 1991) and the 2011 e-book written with Rachel S. Heller, Click, Flip, RUSH – Reclaiming Clarity in the Hyperlink Age. Her keynote addresses and speeches become articles in widely-read journals. Zaimont believes “the creative mindset informs all of life,” and her motto is: “Make something happen that didn’t exist before.”

Since moving to Maricopa she and two music neighbors founded a conductor-less chamber orchestra, which now performs regularly and around Maricopa. She was also a key player in bringing together Maricopa’s creative, fine and performing artists in 2012 for city showcases, and in 2013 founding the new Maricopa ARTS Council (where she is co-director).

“Don’t talk about it—do it!” Zaimont’s energy and efficiency arise from a stern self-discipline evident very early in life: she realized at age eleven that she was born to be a composer. And it is as if she has a list of aphorisms that keep her going: “Work outside the established frame of reference—do the thing that didn’t exist before.” Add in her mother’s watchword: “If you can’t go through, go around!” along with Zaimont’s own, “Believe in yourself: this is your identity! You make the outlines of the box.” To listen to Judith Zaimont speak is to be in the company of an unstoppable, unwavering power.

NOTES
1. Doris Lang Kosloff, a thoughtful and superb opera conductor, is now conductor and coach in Hartt School of Music’s opera program.
3. Zaimont, telephone interview with the author, August 7, 2013. Subsequent quotations are from the same telephone interview.
5. Ibid.
6. Elizabeth Moak, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 25, 2013.

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