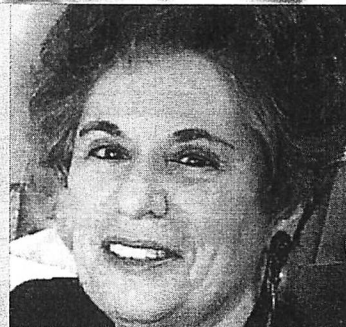




**JUDITH LANG  
ZAIMONT**

**AMERICAN  
COMPOSER**

*by* **KYLE GANN**



Judith Lang Zaimont's website is awfully faceless and official for someone whose music is so charming and personal, so far away from the kind of doctrinaire atonalism or bland middle-of-the-roadism that her long list of credits and awards projects. I'm little impressed by prizes, since many of the most colorful "outlaw" composers never get them; all they suggest is that the person spends a lot of time applying. Between the lines, however, and in a few liner notes, one picks up more humanizing tidbits about Zaimont; notably, she was born in Tennessee and grew up in New York, which seems unusual. And, as a teenager, she was in a piano duo with her sister Doris, with whom she still performs. Beyond that, one only gets a picture of someone involved in the hectic professional life of being a composer.

I suspect, though, from the superficiality of the description one finds on the site, that Zaimont is one of those composers who don't have a very verbal relationship to music. It's clear she's not one of the late twentieth century's ideological figures. I haven't found a twelve-tone work, or a relentlessly dissonant one. Already in the mid-1970s she was writing both tonal and non-tonal music, at a time when nobody was writing tonal music except for the minimalists; and although she's a decade younger than Steve Reich and Philip Glass, there's not a measure in Zaimont's music to suggest that she'd ever heard minimalist music or was impressed with it at all. In a way her music is old-

Sometimes such methods are easy to hear, but in her more abstract pieces, like *Doubles*, for oboe and piano, they're underneath the surface and subtle, though still satisfying.

Rhythmic articulation is Zaimont's strong point. *Hidden Heritage* opens with an ear-catching phrase seven and a half beats long that keeps coming back in off-beat but clever rhythmic placements. Though unminimalist, her music falls into grooves at times, and—what's harder—works its way out of them gracefully. Uninfluenced by others as she sounds, there is a link, or rather a parallel—and I would never have thought of it except that she studied with him—with her teacher André Jolivet. Born too early to join the serialist generation, Jolivet was an excellent, hard-to-pigeonhole French composer who, like Zaimont, wrote colorful, vigorous music and wasn't afraid to delve into tonality or atonality as the moment demanded. Jolivet has been underrated in favor of the doctrinaire serialists who closely succeeded him, and in general the twentieth century wasn't kind to ideologically "impure" composers who didn't take a dogmatic stand on the tonal/atonal question.

But Zaimont has outlived the ideological era, and by refusing to flow with peer pressure has at last emerged as quite timely. What I like best about her is her versatility. She's capable of not only thorny abstraction, but also of light atmosphere and humor, as in her memorably charming ragtimes, "Judy's Rag" and

**Judith Lang Zaimont is a name I'd heard for many years without forming a distinct impression. Her pieces seem to be played often, and yet—at least in the New York circles I frequent—rarely in bulk. Recently, however, I had occasion to hear an entire compact disc of her music, and grouped together, her works gain an attractive cumulative profile. Intrigued, I "Googled" her—a verb that is coming to synonymize "looking someone up on the Internet" the way "Xerox" has come to mean "copy." What biographical material I found, duplicated on dozens of sites including hers ([www.jzaimont.com](http://www.jzaimont.com)), was disappointingly impersonal. She's written close to a hundred works, won a great many prizes and awards, has had several residencies. She used to teach at Peabody and Adelphi, and since 1992 she has been on the faculty at the University of Minnesota.**

fashioned, as though she just let the late twentieth century pass her by. And yet her textures are quite intricate and detailed in a late-twentieth-century way, almost reminding one of the late Stefan Wolpe in a quasi-tonal idiom. She seems to have spun music out of so much innate musicality that she was never motivated to search for a theoretical approach, or to philosophically question what kind of music a person ought to write.

Such music, purely musical music, can be difficult to write about. Every critic has probably had the experience, and God knows I have, of hearing a magnificent piece that is intuitive and organic and just seems to have fallen out of the air—and you just can't think what to say about it. One can churn out words endlessly about composers who, like Cage, Feldman, Xenakis, Oliveros, have lots of ideas or who go to counterintuitive extremes. But when Zaimont's music is emotionally convincing, it's hard to say why. Her musical methods aren't obvious on the surface. One thing she likes to do is get a recurring rhythm going, like the jaunty, repeating 5/8 pattern in movement three of *Hidden Heritage*, her chamber symphony based on African-American paintings.

Another Zaimont trick is to take a phrase with a characteristic rhythm and have its contour evolve as the piece progresses.

"Reflective Rag." Her *Russian Summer* piano trio is as intricate as any modernist could want, yet keeps gleefully V-I cadencing in A as though she's pretending she's Tchaikovsky. She's got a whole CD called *Summer Melodies*, piano tunes that could pass as background music in a hotel lobby without raising eyebrows, yet they are written with the same careful craftsmanship she applies to everything. A twelve-movement piano piece called *A Calendar Set* celebrates the months; fragments of Christmas carols run contrapuntally through "December," and "July" is an homage to the Fourth, with bits of John Philip Sousa and "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" that demand comparison with Charles Ives. Zaimont's Fourth is less raucous and photorealist, but just as affectionate.

I admire this ability to put aside highbrow aims and return to them at will. Beethoven, after all, wrote his heroic symphonies, his lucrative Scottish folk song arrangements, his pandering *Wellington's Victory*, and his arcane *Grosse Fuge*. Zaimont doesn't have quite that range, but she can write elegantly professional abstract chamber pieces, witty rags, deeply felt impressionist musings, even convincing jazz and parlor music. And in some ineffable way they all sound like her, and all very musical. ■