Changing with the Times: Ethel Smyth's Operatic Odyssey

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There are many stories about Ethel Smyth. Her life spanned nearly a century—from the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th—and she stands apart from her British contemporaries by having achieved success in opera composition. If I were to tell you about her music's performance, we would journey through Germany and England, as far afield as Prague and New York then back to Paris, following her musical fortunes in opera, chamber music and other genres. If I spoke of her other interests, we would range from feminist activism, successful writing, and a great love of travel, to outdoor sports and games. Or I could introduce you to Smyth's social circles: to meet great and famous musicians, aristocrats and royal personages, and many independent creative women, with some of whom she engaged in passionate relationships.

But today I want to think about Smyth's audiences: a changing population of listeners, which she struggled to attract and maintain throughout her career. Smyth's music was heard in public and private venues in performances with widely differing audiences and purposes, and Smyth's efforts to create an audience for her music led to a shift in its social mix, reflecting both the composer's desired public and the actual people who came to hear her. This change evolved partly from Smyth's time of militant activism as a suffragette before the first world war—which brought her into contact with a class of people she had not met before—and was also a response to the changing structures of the arts world in that turbulent decade.

When Smyth was young, her music was heard by private audiences gathered in the domestic setting. Such performances remained an important part of her life and career. Smyth played to family and friends for pleasure, to introduce her music and to receive feedback. Smyth did not use such domestic music-making as a way of promoting herself on the marriage market—she was definitely not for sale—but instead used it to promote her new works. When patrons of the arts or people with influence in artistic institutions were present, these informal performances gained added point.

In the late 1870s Smyth went to study in Germany. She found herself living in a society imbued with music, and moving in exalted musical circles where 'domestic' or informal music-making might involve reading through newly-composed works by Brahms for chamber ensemble or in piano arrangements, even with the composer present. Smyth maintained for the rest of her life that German audiences were truly musical, unlike their British counterparts.

She told a story that demonstrated her belief that profound musicality was a trait of any class of German: she had offended the critic of the influential journal *Signale für die musikalische Welt*—who had come to Weimar in 1898 to review the premiere of her first opera *Fantasio*—by telling him that the opinion of the opera by which she would set most store was that of her hotel porter!

Despite this avowal, Smyth made use of her German musical connections—pressing her music on conductors from Mottl to Mahler, and getting aristocratic friends to stage social functions at which she could meet with influential patrons and administrators. She remained confident that the German public would respond to her work with an open mind; that given a fair performance her music would be fairly judged by the audience, if not by the critics. Her faith in the British public was less sure. She felt they were less musically educated and too easily swayed by a biased press. Many of the 'leaders' of musical life were superficial socialites, without a deep love for the art itself. Besides which, they lacked the appetite for new operas that characterised the Germans.

Smyth did not feel part of the musical establishment in her native land, and she struggled to make herself known when she returned from years of study in Germany. After a few orchestral works were performed in the early 1890s, her big break appeared to have come as the result of perhaps her most exalted 'domestic' performance—when she played and sang portions of her Mass to Queen Victoria (and the assembled court) at Balmoral. Although there was no direct result, a later approach to the Prince of Wales brought pressure to bear on the Royal Choral Society (of which he was patron), so that they premiered Smyth's Mass. Members of the royal family and the Empress Eugènie (formerly Empress of France) pledged their presence at the Mass's Albert Hall premiere, which gave Society the lead and ensured that the boxes displayed an eminent audience. These people, rather than the larger numbers in the cheaper seats, lent 'brilliance' to the occasion, thus creating its outward success. This established a paradigm for the first 20 years of Smyth's career. She knew that aristocratic and royal influence was what counted in the image-conscious world of opera, especially in London.

Smyth fought mightily to see her operas staged, and she broke into London's opera scene with her second opera *Der Wald*, which was staged at Covent Garden in the summer of 1902 (after its Berlin premiere) and again in 1903. The revival is significant, because the few native operas taken on by Covent Garden were usually relegated to late in the season, thus given no change to establish themselves with the audience by means of an extended run. Given these circumstances, revival was very rare.

Smyth's third opera, *The Wreckers* was performed in Leipzig and Prague in 1906, but this gave the work no entrée to Covent Garden, despite her past success. The chairman of the Covent Garden Syndicate, Harry Higgins, rejected the work and Smyth quoted his letter as follows:

> Frankly, there is no chance of our being able to produce it. To announce a new work by a new composer is to secure an absolutely empty house ... I feel sure you will understand that we are not justified in embarking on expeditions into *terra incognita* at the expense of our shareholders.[1]

[1] Ethel Smyth, *Beecham and Pharaoh* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1935) 24.

He added 'Though of course, if Puccini brought us a new and untried work, it would be an entirely different matter.'[2] Smyth publicised this letter in the daily press, and among members of the music establishment. She emphasised the difficulties she faced, but was well aware of the promotional opportunity brought by public controversy. Her determination to see *The Wreckers* staged in London only increased after the successful performance of her chamber songs at the Bechstein Hall in February 1908.[3] Smyth undertook a number of concerts and informal private 'playthroughs' in an attempt to draw attention to her new opera.

Around this time, Smyth made friends with the harpsichordist Violet Gordon Woodhouse,[4] who organised the inclusion of 'On the Cliffs of Cornwall' (Overture to Act 2 of *The Wreckers*) in a programme of the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Nikisch in May 1908.[5] The interest it awakened emboldened Smyth to plan a concert performance of the first two acts of *The Wreckers* with the same ensemble and conductor. Smyth thus tapped into an existing audience base—the subscribers to the orchestral concert series—and gained more promotion for her main aim, the staging of the opera. The concert performance was prepared at one solitary orchestral rehearsal, and Smyth felt this was sadly evidenced by the concert on 30 May 1908 in Queens Hall.[6] It is testimony to the power of Smyth's score that the audience received it with great enthusiasm, notwithstanding the limitations of concert performance and abbreviation. The concert had been funded by Harry Brewster, Smyth's longstanding collaborator and lover, in a last act of generosity and love before his death in 1908.[7]

After this concert performance, more excerpts from *The Wreckers* were included in orchestral programmes: several numbers were heard at Beecham's Orchestral Concerts,[8] and were also played by the Philharmonic Society under Bruno Walter.[9] Smyth thus created and prepared an audience for the staging of the work that she was finally to achieve, having realised that the only way to get an English stage premiere was to arrange it herself.

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[2] Christopher St. John, *Ethel Smyth: A Biography* (London: Longmans, 1959) 113. St. John later comments that 'at this time the Grand Opera Syndicate was being severely criticised for not introducing more new works into the repertory, and for adhering to the star system.' [134]

[3] Ethel Smyth, *What Happened Next* (London: Longmans, 1940) 303. Bechstein Hall became the Wigmore Hall during the first world war. The chamber songs (1907), based on poems by Henri de Régnier, were also performed successfully in Paris, and several times privately in London at this time. Extracts by Paris critics were included in a publicity sheet of reviews which Smyth or her publisher released.

[4] Violet Gordon Woodhouse (1872–1948) was a harpsichordist who played a part in the first stages of the early music revival. Her biographer, Jessica Douglas-Home, said Woodhouse met Smyth at a 'play-through' of *The Wreckers* arranged by the Princesse de Polignac in London. *Violet: The Life and Loves of Violet Gordon Woodhouse* (London: The Harvill Press, 1996) 104.

[5] Douglas-Home 105. The concert took place on 2 May 1908, and the review in the *Times* made reference to the Leipzig premiere and to the forthcoming concert performance. *Times* 4 May 1908: 13.

[6] Smyth, *Beecham and Pharaoh* 23; 'In the Concert Room,' *Monthly Musical Record* (1 July 1908): 161.

[7] Ethel Smyth, 'Female Pipings in Eden,' *Female Pipings in Eden*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Peter Davies, 1934) 41.

[8] The third concert of his second concert series was held on 19 April 1909. *Athenaeum* 24 Apr. 1909: 506; *Musical Times* 50 (1 May 1909): 327.

[9] *Manchester Guardian* 23 June 1909: 7; Cyril Ehrlich, *First Philharmonic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 180, 260; Robert Elkin, *Royal Philharmonic: The Annals of the Royal Philharmonic Society* (London: Rider, [1946]) 103, 133. Smyth claimed that the Philharmonic 'has not performed a note of my music … except once or thrice in response to the threats of a female guarantor!' Ethel Smyth, 'A Burning of Boats,' *London Mercury* (Feb. 1924): 384–85. Despite Smyth's complaints against the Philharmonic, Elkin states that 'her Overture to *The Wreckers* proved so successful under Bruno Walter's direction in March that he repeated it in November, and in December she conducted two of her songs (sung by Frederic Austin), thus achieving the distinction of being the first woman to conduct the Philharmonic orchestra.' The Overture was repeated on 26 January 1915 and 26 February 1917, and the Prelude to Act 2 ('On the Cliffs of Cornwall') was performed on 10 December 1917. Elkin, *Royal Philharmonic*, 103–4, 141, 144, 145.

With private financial backing Smyth engaged Thomas Beecham to conduct *The Wreckers* at His Majesty's Theatre in June 1909. The young conductor was estranged from his father Joseph, owner of the Beecham Pills fortune, and Smyth effected a reconciliation by securing the attendance of King Edward, Queen Alexandra and the Princess Victoria at a special performance in her *Wreckers* week, a fact duly announced in the newspapers. This bestowed a respectability and success on the venture that brought Joseph Beecham back to hear his son Thomas, and from this came the artistic/financial enterprise that was to promise so much to music-making in Britain. It did not harm Smyth's ticket sales either.

Smyth's practice of engaging royal and aristocratic support to draw and enhance her audiences served her well on many more occasions than I can mention here. The fact that her first two operas were performed at German court theatres is telling. But Smyth's world began to change at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. When her creative partner and lover Henry Brewster died in 1908, Smyth lost direction for a while, and the forces of political and cultural change began to touch her life. Picking herself up after Brewster's death, Smyth found new interest in the Women's Social and Political Union, the suffrage organisation run by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst. Her involvement with the WSPU included demonstrating with them on marches, speaking at meetings and taking part in militant actions. But she found a special place for herself providing music for the movement, most notably the 'March of the Women,' which became one of their battle anthems. She wrote and conducted several choral works for performance for and by suffragettes, and arranged a benefit concert of her own music.[10] The benefit may well have been mutual on this occasion; even though the money raised went to the suffrage movement, Smyth could not have overlooked the promotional value of her music being showcased in this way. And the reviews in *Votes for Women* sang her praises.

Smyth left the suffrage movement after two years, to return to full-time composition. And her next opera, *The Boatswain's Mate* demonstrated that her horizons had changed and that she had a new sense of reaching an audience through humour and a changed musical style. Of all Smyth's operas, this is the only one with an overtly feminist plot, and she used themes from her suffrage works (including the 'March of the Women') in its overture. The comedy, based on a short story by W.W. Jacobs, is very English and down to earth, and revolves around an independent woman, and the efforts of several men to 'catch' her. Smyth used folk songs throughout the work, adopting a format akin to ballad opera in the first part, changing to a more through-composed texture with heightened musical tension in the second part.

Throughout the composition, which took place in Egypt, Smyth wrote letters to Mrs Pankhurst, some of which she published later in *Beecham and Pharaoh*. It seems clear that Smyth had the suffragette audience in mind, imagining how they would like this joke or that, usually at the expense of foolish men, and describing how deftly she set these to music.

Despite this apparently English focus, Smyth wrote later that 'since *The Wreckers* fiasco at Covent Garden in 1910 I no longer looked to England in matters operatic,'[11] and for *The*

[10] For detailed discussion of this period, see Elizabeth Wood, 'Performing Rights: A Sonography of Woman's Suffrage,' *Musical Quarterly* 79 (Winter 1995): 606–43.

[11] Smyth, *Beecham and Pharaoh* 177. Smyth was determined that her new opera would be the making of her, after her difficulties in gaining recognition for *The Wreckers*. She wrote to Pankhurst, 'The composing (successfully) of *The Boatswain's Mate* has been the final screw in the lever which lifts me and *The Wreckers* out of the morass into which the vileness, treachery and vanity and brutality of the men … have pushed us.' Louise Collis, *Impetuous Heart: The Story of Ethel Smyth* (London: Kimber, 1984) 141.

Boatswain's Mate she approached German publishers and arranged a German premiere. Its hybrid style not only reflects contemporary English concerns with national opera through its use of ballad opera style and folk melodies, but also keys in to modern German operatic developments, especially pastiche techniques as employed by Richard Strauss. Smyth herself reviewed *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1913, and wrote in detail of his use of comedy.[12] Recent commentators have suggested that Smyth's use of the gestures and heightened emotion of serious opera could be seen as parody and pastiche of it,[13] yet despite this added level to the comedy, in a sense Smyth had targeted *The Boatswain's Mate* at a broader market. Part One catered to lovers of operetta and light opera while Part Two held appeal for the serious opera aficionado. Both Germany and England supported audiences for both genres.

The outbreak of the first world war meant that Smyth's English comedy was never performed in Germany, so we will never know how her very national humour would have translated, but with her native audiences it was a great success. Her struggles to gain adequate revivals continued, but *The Boatswain's Mate* was her only opera to be taken into repertory and became the most successful of her operas, with numerous performances, both in London and the provinces, throughout the 1920s. The number of revivals within several years of the premiere indicate how well she had gauged the mood of the time: in the public eye for many reasons, she had composed a hybrid of light and grand opera just as taste was changing. Her subject matter attracted a new audience to opera when interest was awakening in a broader cross-section of society. After the war, London opera audiences became less socially exclusive. The Ballets Russes in particular drew crowds from lower classes, and theatres like Lilian Baylis's Old Vic established strong followings not based on the social elite.

Smyth herself had followed her suffragette experience with war-work as a radiographer in France. She never lost touch with her upper-class milieu, but the seeds of a broader awareness were sown. During the war she began to write her memoirs *Impressions that Remained*, published in 1919. Many years later Smyth claimed that:

> nothing would induce me to write a book aimed at the head of the musical reader. One might occasionally dive into the past and fish up something connected with music ... But the real interest ... lay in the human happening ... so there was little danger of boring Mr. and Mrs. Everyman, who, with their families, are the public I really write for.[14]

This intended audience was also the group that Smyth identified as most appreciative of her music. She always claimed that the majority of her audiences and the members of choral societies or orchestras who played her music loved it, and that they were the ones whose response really mattered to her. Criticism from the press and neglect by the musical establishment could be proven misguided or insignificant, if the audience really liked her music. As she wrote to Edward Dent in 1925:

> This gulf between what the English musical *critic* feels & what the *public* feels became manifest to me one day during the deadliest of the 2 Elgar symphonies—I forget which—

[12] Ethel Smyth, ' "The Rose Cavalier": Opera by Richard Strauss,' *Suffragette* 21 Feb. 1913: 291.
[13] See Elizabeth Wood's articles 'Performing Rights: A Sonography of Woman's Suffrage' 629 and 'Gender and Genre in Ethel Smyth's Operas,' *The Musical Woman II* (1984–85): 497.
[14] Ethel Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, 1920) vol. 1, 1–2.

> when I said to my sister 'if the audience looked like that when my music is being played I'd shoot myself.' You could see & feel that those people were bored to death ... yet next day ... ravings in the press!—& the public go to hear him & think that is enjoyment (of a high class!!) Well. I always feel that a Press that really raves about Elgar (except his quite early work) *can not*, by any possibily [*sic*] like—not *really* like—my music. [15]

The numerous performances of Smyth's music during the 1920s were due in large part to the popularity of her memoirs.[16] The broad public who felt they had come to know Dame Ethel in the pages of *Impressions that Remained* wanted to hear the music which had been the central preoccupation of her life.

Smyth developed the idea that her music spoke to the 'common man', in her letter to Dent:

> I remember a wise old man who used to be at Schotts saying to me 'You know how to talk to the *people* in music' (which is what Walter is forever saying—asking me if I realise how close to 'das Volk' I am in my grain—musically & otherwise) 'Stick to that! *You won't please the reviewers* ... but that is where your strength lies.' Well—I know now that this is true—that the *audiences* when I am allowed to get at them, understand what I am talking about. Catch the tone of my voice & feel 'that's true talk' as a quite simple man said to me the other day being the unmusical Dean of Worcester![17]

Smyth's description of a Dean as a 'quite simple man' suggests that her notion of the 'people' may not have included the working class; she seems instead to refer to the element of her audience that excluded both professional musicians and the aristocracy. She developed this more democratic aspect of her public image as a composer, particularly after her engagement with women's suffrage, reconstructing herself in her published writings and private correspondence.

Smyth's faith that her true following was among the people rather than in the higher ranks of musical society may seem slightly at odds with her choice of opera as preferred genre, for opera had always played to an elite audience, particularly in England. Her first three operas, and even her Mass and choral works, were neither easily performed nor to be undertaken lightly. Smyth's early conception of her ideal audience was based on her experience of what she saw as the 'universal' musicality of the German people, who had been the first to recognise and truly encourage her talent. Finding it impossible to maintain this ideal in England however, from *The Boatswain's Mate* on, Smyth re-oriented her operatic composition and public persona to appeal to a broader audience, thus gaining a place in the affections of many 'ordinary' people.

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[15] Ethel Smyth, letter to Edward Dent, 17 Oct. 1925, E. Smyth Papers, Dent Collection, Rowe Music Library, Kings College Cambridge.

[16] Derek Hyde espouses this belief: 'The two volumes of autobiography, *Impressions that Remained*, which began the series of nine books which she wrote, did much to stimulate interest in her music and to a large extent accounted for the more frequent performances of her music during the period 1920 to 1940.' Derek Hyde, *New-Found Voices: Women in Nineteenth-Century Music*, 3rd ed. (Aldershot; Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998) 182.

[17] Smyth, letter to Dent, 17 Oct. 1925.