

“One of the most remarkable people of our time”

Dame Edith Mary Smyth Mus. Doc. (1858-1944)

“She was one of the most remarkable people of our time, among men or women, and there are many of us alive today who cherish her memory, and we do so with admiration, respect and a great deal of love.” This was how Sir Thomas Beecham concluded his tribute to Dame Ethel in a broadcast on the BBC Home Service in April 1958 to mark her centenary.

Ethel Smyth was the fourth of eight children – six girls and two boys - born to Major General John Hall Smyth of the Royal Artillery and his wife Emma nee Struth. Her childhood was spent in Sidcup near Woolwich where her father commanded the Artillery Depot having recently returned from India and then Frimley near Farnborough from 1867 when her father, promoted to General, took command of the Artillery at Aldershot. It was at this time that Ethel discovered her aptitude for music and started composing – she says mainly psalm chants and hymns – and playing the piano and singing with her sister Mary. Their duets became a feature of home dinner parties. Her mother, who was musical, albeit untrained, encouraged her. When a new governess who had studied at Leipzig Conservatorium arrived and introduced her to classical music, Ethel aged 12 became determined that she would go to Leipzig to study there. Harmony lessons with an army officer colleague of her father who also happened to be a composer introduced her to Wagner and she conceived a desire to have an opera produced in Germany before she was forty. Her father wanted her to ‘be presented’ and to marry but Edith was determined to study to be a composer. Edith had begun to slip away to London on her own to attend concerts – she borrowed money from local tradesmen and told them to put the sum on the General’s account. This provoked a confrontation with her father and she said that she would have to go to London to hear music if she was not allowed to go to Leipzig. She embarked on a campaign of disobedience, refusing to go to church, refusing to sing at dinner parties and refusing to talk to anyone and her father finally relented. A family friend who recognised Ethel’s talent and wanted to encourage her produced a respectable aunt who would look after her and Ethel departed for Leipzig in July 1877.

Finding the teaching at the Conservatorium unsatisfactory Ethel started to take private lessons with Heinrich von Herzogenberg whose wife Elisabeth (known as Frau Lisl) was a former pupil and close musical confidant of Brahms. Through the von Herzogenbergs Ethel gained access to the highest levels of music society in Germany and was able to observe Brahms himself from close quarters.

The story of Ethel’s childhood and teenage years illustrates three characteristics that proved to be typical of her whole life: her defiance of convention in refusing to marry and choosing to be a composer, her ambition, moreover, to compose operas, the most expensive form she could have chosen rather than the piano pieces and songs that were the typical output of most female composers at the time, and her iron determination to have her own way.

Some miscellaneous Ethel Smyth facts

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Further reading/listening

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Ethel Smyth's music in the Surrey Performing Arts Library collection

Complete piano music vols 1 and 2

All Ethel's piano music was written while she was studying in Leipzig, none of it dating from later than 1880. In addition to a number of pastiches of Bach, Haydn and other composers, there are three piano sonatas dating from 1877, the third one unfortunately incomplete, and Variations on an

Original Theme (of an Exceedingly Dismal Nature) in D flat from 1878. Ethel was a keen rider and the fourth variation is dedicated to Phyllis, a filly that had thrown her. The piano pieces show that when she arrived in Leipzig she had somehow already acquired a sound technique.

SPAL collection: Single copies of vol 1 and vol 2. edited by Liana Gavrilă-Serbescu Published by Breitkopf & Härtel 2003

Trio in D minor for violin, cello and piano 1880 This [four-movement piece](#) showing the strong influence of Brahms is an early work written while she was studying with Herzogenberg in Leipzig. It did not receive its first performance until 1985 in the US and was not published until 2005.

SPAL collection: one score Roberton Publications 2005 Edited by Terry King

The **Mass in D major** 1891 revised 1925 was Ethel's first major choral work and was intended to launch her career in England. The Mass lasts about 65' and is set on the grandest of scales for soloists, choir and a large orchestra. The composer requested that the [Gloria](#) be performed last, following the Anglican prayer book rite, thus ending the work triumphantly rather than with a prayer. The first performance was given at the Royal Albert Hall in January 1893 by the Royal Choral Society under Sir Joseph Barnby. Ethel had to wait 30 years for a second performance when the Mass was taken up by Adrian Boult and the Birmingham Festival Choral Society in 1924. A revised version received a number of performances in 1925. Critical opinion was mixed. The Musical Times review of the Birmingham revival was lukewarm to say the least. In part this may have been that Ethel's demands on performers made no concessions; her world was that of professionals not that of amateurs. The collection includes a vocal score donated from the BBC Choral Reference Library Collection that was used for two BBC broadcasts and contains manuscript conductors' marks. The performances, both with BBC forces, were in 1937 under Leslie Woodgate and in 1943 under Sir Adrian Boult.

SPAL collection: 27 vocal scores Novello and Company 1925

CD Chorus of Plymouth music series/Harrhy/Hardy/Dressen EMI 1991

Ethel's 'Lyrical Drama in Three Acts' **The Wreckers 1902-4** was first performed in Leipzig in 1906. The libretto was written originally in French by Henry Brewster. As her only close male friend, Brewster was a significant person in Ethel's life; all her other passionate attachments were with women. The opera is set in a Cornish fishing village where the inhabitants plunder the cargos of passing sailing ships who they have lured on to the rocks. One of their number has been lighting beacons on the cliffs to warn ships and the plot revolves around discovering the identity of who is doing that, further complicated by a love triangle (or possibly quadrilateral) and a case of mistaken identity.

After failing to obtain a French performance the opera was premiered in Leipzig in 1906 in a German translation. The opening night with 16 curtain calls was a success but there were no further performances as Ethel removed the score and parts from the pit in protest against cuts which the conductor, Richard Hagel, had insisted on.

The first performances in England took place under Beecham in 1909 in an English translation. Sir Thomas includes a vivid description of his first encounter with Ethel when she told him "You have got to conduct my opera The Wreckers." After Ethel had played through the whole piece to him,

‘mostly the wrong notes, but still with a vigour and élan that was very inspiring’, he agreed to take it on. Gustav Mahler was considering a performance at the Vienna State Opera in 1907 but unfortunately was driven from office before this came about, which was a great disappointment to the composer.

The [Overture](#) to *The Wreckers* often appears in concert programmes. Less so the prelude to the second act ‘On the cliffs of Cornwall’ which the conductor Bruno Walter reported had made a profound impression on audiences when it was played in Vienna in 1913.

A recording of *The Wreckers* was made in 1994 conducted by the Smyth specialist Odaline de la Martinez.

SPAL collection: Full score of the overture. Breitkopf & Härtel 1911. One copy of the vocal score English and German words Universal Edition 1916.

CDs BBC Philharmonic/de la Martinez/Owens/Lavender/Sidhom Conifer 1994

Hey Nonny No 1910, a setting for choir and orchestra of a 16th century drinking song found in the library of Christ Church, Oxford, was praised by Beecham as ‘the most vigorous composition of English musical literature I know’. It was also highlighted by Bruno Walter as having been one of Ethel’s works that made a profound impression in Vienna in 1913. It appears never to have been recorded and to have been last broadcast by the BBC in 1937.

SPAL collection: One vocal score Breitkopf & Härtel 1911.

Songs of sunrise No. 1 Laggard Dawn 1910

Laggard Dawn is the first of a set of three songs published in 1910 in support of the campaign for women’s suffrage. It sets a text by Ethel herself which starts “When will the weary night be over? When will the laggard sun arise?” for three-part female choir. In 1910 Ethel had decided to step back from her musical commitments to devote two years to support Emmeline Pankhurst’s Women’s Social and Political Union or what Beecham described as a diversion into ‘politics and revolutionary activity’. The set of songs concluded with Ethel’s stirring ‘March of the Women’ setting a text by Cicely Hamilton. Ethel showed her usual level of commitment to any cause she took up and was imprisoned in Holloway Prison after throwing a missile which broke a cabinet member’s window. During the three weeks that she actually served of her two-month sentence Beecham visited her and observed her conducting her March with a toothbrush from the window of her cell while her fellow suffragettes exercised in the yard below.

SPAL collection: 42 scores Breitkopf & Härtel 1911

The Boatswain’s Mate 1913-14 is a one-act comic opera based on a libretto written by Ethel herself. Retired boatswain Harry Benn plots to persuade Mrs Waters, a widow and landlady of ‘The Beehive’, to marry him by staging a fake burglary. This goes disastrously wrong when the pretend burglar, Travers, appears to have been accidentally shot dead by Mrs Waters but it turns out that he is still alive. Left alone with Travers, Mrs Waters’ reluctance to consider remarriage appears to weaken.

The first performances were intended to take place in Munich in 1915 but this plan was overtaken by the outbreak of the First World War. In the event the opera was first performed in London in 1916. Eugene Goossens had been entrusted with the premiere but on the day Ethel decided to conduct herself. Goossens said "At the last moment she took over the baton, thinking herself the Heaven-sent conductor she was not."

The opera uses a number of folk melodies but these were not intrinsic to Ethel's style as they were with her younger contemporaries such as Vaughan Williams.

SPAL collection: Two vocal scores English and German Universal Edition 1915.

CD: Lontano Ensemble Retrospect Opera 2016

Dreamings 1920 is a part-song for three-part women's voices setting a poem by the Irish journalist, poet and novelist Patrick Macgill. The poem starts "The bog blossom's golden pistil,/The shimmering torrent's crystal/Fling of its sapphire waters, crested with foam-drift white,"

SPAL collection 28 copies published by Year Book Press

Fête Galante 1921-22 is a one-act 'Dance dream' with a libretto by Ethel and the poet Edward Shanks based on a story by Ethel's friend Maurice Baring. It was a return to the genre after a seven-year break spanning World War I. Commissioned by the British National Opera Company it was first performed in Birmingham in June 1923 and in London later the same month. The story is about a late night fête galante involving aristocrats and a commedia dell'arte troupe. Jealousy, desire, and multiple masquerades end in the death of one of the characters.

A complete recording of Fête Galante by Retrospect Opera was released in November 2019

SPAL collection One vocal score Universal Edition 1923

Two Interlinked French Folk Melodies Entente Cordiale is a one-act comic opera with a libretto by the composer. It was first performed by students at the Royal College of Music in 1925 and is her sixth and last opera. Set around the end of World War I the plot revolves around the farcical consequences of a British soldier's imperfect understanding of French. Ethel made several arrangements of an intermezzo from the opera as [Two Interlinked French Folk Melodies](#) which probably were one of the most frequently broadcast of her works, appearing first in 1928 and regularly during the 1940.s and in to the 1970;s and 80s.

SPAL collection One condensed score OUP 1929

The Prison 1929-30, described as a Song Symphony for soprano (the Soul), and bass (the Prisoner), chorus and orchestra, was Ethel's final choral work. It sets a dialogue between an innocent prisoner on the eve of execution and the Soul compiled by the composer from a book by Henry Brewster. Its premiere was given in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh in February 1931 conducted by the composer. A few days later there was a broadcast performance from The Queen's Hall by the Bach Choir and the LSO under the baton of Adrian Boult. There were further broadcast performances in 1934 and 1937 but none in the UK since. There have been performances in Berlin (2008) and the US in 2018. A

[crowd-funded recording](#) was made in New York in early 2019 which is due for release in August 2020.

SPAL collection: One vocal score Curwen 1930

The SPAL collection also includes CDs of Ethel Smyth's Chamber Music and Song Fanny Mendelssohn Quartet/Dutilly Set of 2 1991 and Ethel Smyth Ensemble/Paulsen/Eggebrecht-Kupsa/Draxinger 1992 both Trouba Disc

In old age Dame Ethel suffered from increasing deafness and distorted hearing. Turning from music to writing, she produced ten books of memoirs, travel and biography. At the end of her life she was as well-known as a writer if not more so than she was as a composer. She also broadcast on the radio.

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