

# English Music in the 20th Century

## Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944)



Composer, author, and suffragette, Ethel Smyth used her determination and strong personality from an early age, to pursue her dreams. Born into a middle-class family of eight children in South London in 1858, her French mother and high-ranking Army General father raised her according to the traditional strict Victorian mores of the time.

Ethel Smyth's early piano and theory lessons, taught merely to be ladylike accomplishments, sparked an immediate life-long passion for music. At the age of 12, she announced she would study music at the Leipzig Conservatory. Appalled at this idea and at the intensity Ethel brought to her music studies, her father immediately stopped her lessons. He had not reckoned, however, on his daughter's strong will and persistence. During her teenage years, Ethel openly rebelled against these constraints, locking herself in her room and refusing to attend meals, church or social functions, unless her father agreed to send her to

Leipzig to study composition.

In 1877 he gave in. At age 19, Ethel Smyth travelled to Leipzig, where she studied music with Carl Reinecke at the Conservatory and, privately, with Heinrich von Herzogenberg. A leading cultural centre at the time, Leipzig offered Ethel an exciting world of concerts and operas, as well as introductions to Brahms, Clara Schumann, Tchaikovsky and other important composers of the time.

A composer of full-scale works, Smyth's early pieces include the *Symphonic Serenade in D*, performed in 1890 under the baton of Augustus Mann. The robust quality of this orchestral work gained her recognition from both the public and the press.

An earlier *String Quintet in E Major*, published in 1884, brought a highly respectful review from chamber music critic, Wilhelm Altmann, who wrote "this quintet clearly showcases the composer's tremendous talent".

In 1893, Smyth's success reached new heights with the première at the Royal Albert Hall of her *Mass in D*, her only religious work.

During the following years, Ethel Smyth devoted herself to the world of opera, frequently collaborating with her close friend and librettist, Henry Brewster. Of these, *The Wreckers* (completed in 1911), proved to be the most successful.

Ethel Smyth's meeting with the suffragette leader, Emmaline Pankhurst in 1910, proved to be a turning point in her life. Pledging to give up music for two years, she devoted herself to the cause of votes for women. Smyth's *March of the Women* became the suffragette's anthem. Participating in a well-coordinated series of window smashing incidents by over 100 suffragettes in 1912, Ethel served two months in Holloway Prison. Here, the sense of communal determination and sacrifice by women of all ages and classes inspired her. On one memorable occasion, as the women took their outdoor exercise, singing the suffrage battle anthem, Ethel appeared at a window and conducted them with her toothbrush.

Honoured with Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1922, and in spite of increasing deafness, Ethel Smyth continued to compose throughout the 1920s, producing her important Concerto for Violin and Horn in 1927.

By 1929, with her spirit as fierce and unbroken as ever, she moved from composing music to writing and journalism. Dame Ethel Smyth died in Woking, Surrey in 1944 at the age of 86.