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The Late Works of Dame Ethel Smyth:  
A Musical Microcosm of Interwar British Culture

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The life of Dame Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) was both musically prolific and unconventional. In spite of objections from her family, Smyth left England at the age of nineteen to study music theory and composition in Leipzig, where she came into contact with Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, Clara Schumann, and other prominent composers of the era. An enthusiastic writer, she corresponded with Virginia Woolf and Edith Somerville, among others. After meeting Emmeline Pankhurst in 1910 Smyth became actively involved in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), devoting most of her time to the suffrage movement from 1911 to 1913. She is well known for composing "The March of the Women," which became the anthem of the WSPU and which she later incorporated into the overture to her opera *The Boatswain's Mate*.

Almost everything that can be read about Smyth's life portrays her as a formidable character, passionate and energetic in every type of work she did. A great deal of scholarly literature concentrates particularly on her unique career as a woman composer. Smyth's achievements in composition (particularly of large-scale works) and conducting orchestras are certainly significant during a time when women were generally not encouraged to pursue advanced studies in music theory and composition. According to one scholar, Smyth was exceptional in her day because she "fit neither the mold of performer-teacher nor that of parlor-music composer," two career paths that were generally acceptable for British women in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Bernstein, "Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song! Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer," *Women Making Music: The Western*

Her best-known works were composed roughly between the years 1890 and 1910. The first notable performances of her orchestral works include a rendition of her *Serenade* in 1890 and the premiere of her Mass in D in 1893. She made her debut as an opera composer in 1898 with the premiere of *Fantasio*, followed by performances of her operas *Der Wald* and *The Wreckers* in 1901 and 1906, respectively (*Der Wald* remains the only opera composed by a woman to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York).

During World War I, Smyth realized that her hearing was gradually deteriorating but she continued to compose well into the 1930s. While many have studied the pieces she composed around the turn of the century, this research will consider several of Smyth's later works. Her operas *The Boatswain's Mate* (1914) and *Entente Cordiale* (1923-1924), as well as *The Prison* (1930), a vocal piece for soli and orchestra, can be contextualized by changes in Smyth's circumstances, her relationships, and current events that influenced her. All three works also represent innovations in compositional form, and the later two reflect the composer's hearing loss. Due to the abundance of memoirs that Smyth left behind, one can find valuable insight into her musical approach as well as British and European culture during the interwar period.

Before focusing entirely on Smyth's later life and works, it may be useful to briefly consider Smyth's background, education and earliest sources of inspiration, which she describes in her first book of memoirs, *Impressions That Remained* (1919). Smyth received a typical middle-class Victorian education,

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*Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, Ed. Jane M. Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 307.

first at home and later at a London boarding school. When she was twelve years old, a new governess arrived who had studied at the Leipzig Conservatorium and who introduced Smyth to classical music. Within a short period Smyth “conceived the plan, carried out seven years later, of study at Leipzig and giving up my life to music.”<sup>2</sup> In her later teens, she began harmony lessons with Alexander Ewing, composer of the hymn *Jerusalem the Golden*, and realized her preference for Beethoven over the newer style of Wagner.<sup>3</sup> Although Smyth’s middle-class family had the means to send her to a conservatory, she was one of eight children and money was not unlimited. As a result, financial matters were a source of frustration regarding Smyth’s decision to study music, excluding issues of potential for success based on gender. Despite this tension, Smyth’s determination to fulfill her plan prevailed and before long she was allowed to leave for Germany.

In Leipzig, Smyth mingled in both academic and artistic circles, enjoying the freedom allowed by her status as a foreigner. Furthermore, she believed that she might run the risk of “being narrowed in matters artistic” by confining herself to a single set of people, writing, “socially I have always held firmly to a profound, hereditary conviction that it takes all sorts to make a world.”<sup>4</sup> Her descriptions of German society reveal an adventurous confidence in building a world of her own. She noted how life in Leipzig offered a refreshing difference

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<sup>2</sup> Ethel Smyth, *Impressions That Remained: Memoirs* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-99.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

from the “snobbism of rank and wealth” and the intellectual homogeneity of the “International Smart” that prevailed in larger cities such as London and Berlin.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to broadening her social horizons, Smyth made several important musical connections that contributed to her later success. Having dropped out of her Conservatorium classes in the spring of 1878, she began studying with Heinrich von Herzogenberg and joined the Bach Verein. This year was a turning point in her understanding of composition, largely due to her newfound appreciation of Bach’s music: “Before six months had elapsed Bach occupied the place he has ever since held in my heart as the beginning and end of all music.”<sup>6</sup>

Her acquaintance with the composer George Henschel led her to meeting Brahms, who was already very popular. Smyth’s opinion of Brahms was mixed. She recalled, “From the very first I had worshipped Brahms’s music, as I do some of it now,” but admits she found nothing remarkable about him as a person.<sup>7</sup> When Brahms expressed his opinions on non-musical matters, she claimed, he received greater attention than might have been warranted, due to his status as a famed composer. Smyth also scorned his apparent misogyny: “Brahms, as artist and bachelor, was free to adopt what may be called the poetical variant of the *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* axiom, namely that women are playthings.”<sup>8</sup> This point of view, which she first considered the result of a local difference in culture, seemingly found its way to the center of Germany’s artistic circle.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 235.

Brahms read through some of Smyth's works but did not go out of his way to praise them. According to Smyth's memoirs, he seemed amused (but not impressed) by attempts she made to appeal for his approval. Early on in their acquaintance, Smyth recalls, "Henschel had left a MS. of mine (two songs) with [Brahms], that he subsequently looked at them, and remarked to Frau Röntgen that evidently Henschel had written them himself!"<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether this misunderstanding resulted from Brahms' prejudice against women or purely his opinion of Smyth's talents as a composer at that point in time.

Smyth seemed to have a more constructive relationship with the Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. In *Impressions That Remained* she reflects on a pivotal conversation she had with Tchaikovsky during the winter of 1887-1888 that influenced her musical writing. Although the two composers differed in their opinions of Brahms's music, Smyth wrote, "on one point we were quite of one mind: the neglect in my school ... of colour."<sup>10</sup> Tchaikovsky suggested that she pay attention to inflections of human voices in conversations when coming up with instrumentation. Smyth then recalled that she began attending concerts with a new perspective, taking note of the various orchestral effects she heard, "and ever since have been at least as much interested in sounds as sense, considering the two things indivisible."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 158-159.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 402-403.

Regardless of the role her gender or her frankness played in interactions with other composers, Smyth's success in finding and communicating with authorities in her field encouraged her to continue composing.

Smyth's highest ambition as a composer was to write operas and see them produced. However, opportunities for opera composers as well as audiences were apparently limited in England: "opera [in England] at this time was virtually confined to a summer season at Covent Garden closely linked with the social life of London and provided almost entirely by foreign artists."<sup>12</sup> It seems that circumstances were different in Germany, where opera performances were frequent throughout the year. Partly due to this difference in musical culture, Smyth seemed more likely to succeed at having her operas produced in Germany than in England.

Smyth's comic opera *The Boatswain's Mate* (*The Bo'sun's Mate* or just "*The Bo'sun*," as she often calls it in her memoirs) was accepted to be shown in Frankfurt-am-Main at the same time as *The Wreckers* in Munich.<sup>13</sup> Smyth was wildly excited for these plans to unfold ("My wild dream had come true"<sup>14</sup>) but unfortunately they screeched to a halt at the outbreak of World War I. Smyth quickly joined the war effort to work as a radiographer in France, and it was not until 1916 that *the Beecham Opera Company* premiered *The Boatswain's Mate* at *Shaftesbury Theatre*.

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Cooper, "Stage Works: 1890-1918," in *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. 10, *The Modern Age, 1890-1960*, ed. Martin Cooper (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 187, quoted in Bernstein, "Dame Ethel Smyth," 311.

<sup>13</sup> Ethel Smyth and Ronald Crichton, *The Memoirs of Ethel Smyth* (New York: Viking, 1987), 312.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



This opera can be seen as an expression of Smyth's involvement in the women's suffrage movement, since it comments on an issue that had been brought to the forefront of British politics. Its plot is based on W. W. Jacobs's story about an ex-boatswain's attempt to win the love of a widowed innkeeper by staging a false burglary in her home. Instead of allowing herself to be 'rescued,' the innkeeper outwits the man and reveals his foolishness.

Smyth composed this work after returning from a trip to Egypt and "having gone star-mad in the desert."<sup>15</sup> She took liberties in the form of the piece, since each act is written in a different style. The first act uses ballad opera techniques, borrowed from the eighteenth-century British productions where dialogue in a comic play was interspersed with musical numbers. In this case, Smyth incorporates English folk melodies for the musical numbers. Because of this treatment of the play, David Chandler suggests a comparison between this opera and Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Hugh the Drover (or Love in the Stocks)*, which has a similar form.<sup>16</sup> The second act is through-composed (continuous music permeates the dramatic action).

The opera was a success overall, but was not received without some mixed criticism. The conductor Sir Thomas Beecham felt that Smyth had interrupted the form: "the first act with its mixture of lyrical numbers and dialogue is perfect in style and structure. But in the second this happy scheme is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>16</sup> David Chandler, "The Boatswain's Mate," *Retrospect Opera*, 2014 (Last updated 8 December 2014), accessed 4/17/15, [http://www.minuet.demon.co.uk/Boatswains\\_Mate.html](http://www.minuet.demon.co.uk/Boatswains_Mate.html).

thrown overboard for an uninterrupted stream of music.”<sup>17</sup> However, Jane Bernstein claims this change “makes both musical and dramatic sense, since most of the action of this comedy occurs in the second act, while the first act merely serves to introduce the characters and the story.”<sup>18</sup>

Other critics took a different angle. A 1923 article in *The Musical Times*, reviewing a performance of the opera at The Old Vic theatre, praises the “genial and rich little score,” but expresses concern that without enough music behind the comedy the general public might “here and there resent a rather heavy deliberateness in the humorous utterance and ‘business.’”<sup>19</sup> Smyth’s mixture of forms remained controversial but did not seriously compromise the opera’s success.

During and after World War I, Smyth turned to writing as a second career, recording memoirs that quickly became successful. In composition, however, Smyth moved through a psychological “cycle of preparation, distraction, new purpose, and retreat” due to her hearing loss.<sup>20</sup> Her confidence in her abilities as a composer wavered, but by the end of 1921 she had begun working on her one-act opera *Fête Galante*, a ‘Dance-Dream’ setting of a short story by Maurice Baring. This piece represents Smyth’s resolve and her renewed commitment to music.

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<sup>17</sup> Sir Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime: An Autobiography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1943), 139, quoted in Bernstein, “Shout, Shout,” 316.

<sup>18</sup> Bernstein, “Shout, Shout,” 316.

<sup>19</sup> C., “The Boatswain’s Mate and Prince Ferelon,” *The Musical Times*, Vol. 64, No. 962 (Apr. 1, 1923): 272, accessed 4/17/15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912588>.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Wood, “On Deafness and Musical Creativity: The Case of Ethel Smyth,” *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 1/2 (Spring - Summer, 2009): 39, accessed 4/17/15, <http://0-mq.oxfordjournals.org/helin.uri.edu/content/92/1-2/33.full>.

Smyth composed her final opera, *Entente Cordiale*, from 1923-1924. It consists of one act for which Smyth wrote her own libretto. Sub-titled “A Post-War Comedy,” it portrays a comic incident in a small town in northern France, where a British soldier, Erb Iggins, is sent out to buy a chicken for his battalion and obtain a written receipt for it. Due to his poor grasp of the French language, Iggins (who is already married) unwittingly signs a marriage contract, causing alarm until the misunderstanding is cleared up. The music is described as lighter in character than Smyth’s previous operas, such as *The Wreckers*; it has “a straightforward score using spoken dialogue and tuneful vocal numbers.”<sup>21</sup> Smyth may have wanted to continue her modified ballad opera style of alternation between casual conversation and musical numbers after writing *The Boatswain’s Mate*.

The first full public performance of *Entente Cordiale* was held in 1926 at the Theatre Royal in Bristol, sponsored by its benefactor Philip Napier Miles. A review of the concert by the Italian violinist Ferruccio Bonavia, working as a music critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, seems to accept it as a humorous work, if not musically significant: “Dame Ethel Smyth's 'Entente Cordiale' amused us as we were intended to be amused by it, even though its music is not by any means equal to that of 'The Boatswain's Mate.'”<sup>22</sup> A later review, written after Smyth’s death, claims that the opera “would barely pass muster in a parish room.”<sup>23</sup> It would seem, according to

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<sup>21</sup> Sophie Fuller, “Smyth, Dame Ethel,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2007-2015), accessed 4/8/15, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.helin.uri.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/26038>.

<sup>22</sup> Ferruccio Bonavia, “The Bristol Opera Season,” *The Musical Times*, Vol. 67, No. 1006 (Dec. 1, 1926): 1119, accessed 4/17/15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912635>.

<sup>23</sup> Robin Hull, “Dame Ethel Smyth,” *Tempo*, No. 7 (June 1944): 12, accessed 2/18/15, <http://0-www.jstor.org.helin.uri.edu/stable/942491>.

these reviews, that in this instance Smyth placed greater emphasis on the spoken comedy than on the music, although her later orchestral suite, an arrangement of the same musical material, was fairly successful. Elizabeth Wood, writing in 2009, praises Smyth's use of two French folk melodies in the opera's intermezzo: "her da capo arrangement sets the first tune in jaunty military style with witty dialogues for brass and winds that contrast effectively with the strings," while the second tune is set to slower, more contemplative music.<sup>24</sup>

*The Prison*, the last large-scale work that Smyth composed, is a cantata (it has also been called an oratorio and a choral symphony) for soprano and bass-baritone soli, chorus, and orchestra. Inspired by the written work of her deceased friend Henry Brewster, a British-American writer and philosopher, and by a recent trip to Greece, Smyth compiled the libretto herself. Referred to as "H. B." in *Impressions That Remained*, Brewster was one of her few close male friends and the only man with whom she was romantically involved. Since Brewster was already married at the time when they realized their attraction was mutual, they decided to break off contact with each other. However, Brewster came to a performance of Smyth's *Mass in D* in London in 1890, after his wife's death, and they remained in touch until his death in 1908.

*The Prison* involves a philosophical dialogue between a prisoner and his soul. The conversation begins with the idea of the self and the ramifications of that idea. From there, Brewster proceeds to discuss concepts of God, religious belief systems, and ethics in relation to human beings' internal psychological processes, and

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<sup>24</sup> Wood, "On Deafness," 54.

questions whether one can escape oneself (ego and desire) in order to arrive at the truth (and prepare for death, in the case of the prisoner). Ronald Crichton notes, in his list of Smyth's works, that the motto of the original work was: "I am striving to release that which is divine within us, and to merge it in the universally divine."<sup>25</sup> It is the most abstract and profound of Smyth's vocal pieces, divided into two parts, "Close on freedom" and "The deliverance."

A review of one of *The Prison's* few performances describes it (rather diplomatically) as a challenging piece: "The choral writing is exacting and will need great accuracy of intonation adequately to compass the varied harmonic progressions. Work on such music will certainly be continually interesting."<sup>26</sup> The same critic goes on to warn against posing too many "verbal problems" for the singers, but praises Smyth's command of German and French musical idioms.<sup>27</sup>

Smyth was loyal to Brewster and deeply disappointed at the lack of critical acclaim for this work. Even in the 1987 introduction to Smyth's memoirs, Ronald Crichton remarked, "the composer's affection for this late love-child has not been rewarded by frequent performance."<sup>28</sup>

Smyth's other late works, though few in number, are also worth noting. In her *Concerto for Violin, Horn, and Orchestra* (1926), Smyth is sensitive to the timbres of the two featured instruments without sacrificing the piece's rhythmic drive. She also composed a set of *Variations on Bonny Street Robin (Ophelia's*

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<sup>25</sup> Smyth and Crichton, *The Memoirs*, 381.

<sup>26</sup> "Reviews of Music," *Music & Letters*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan., 1931), Oxford University Press: 100, accessed 4/17/15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/726916>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Smyth and Crichton, *The Memoirs*, 13.

*Song*) (1927), a fanfare called *Hot Potatoes* (1930), and a *Prelude on a Traditional Irish Air* (1938). These last three works are less than ten minutes in length and do not appear to have been reviewed at the time, but they serve as further evidence that Smyth remained active throughout the 1930s.

Critics of Smyth's music often focused, at least in part, on the composer's gender, pointing out the ways in which she may have erred as a woman or as a musician. Smyth writes in *Impressions That Remained* that following a performance of her Violin Sonata in November 1887 "the critics unanimously said it was devoid of feminine charm and therefore unworthy a woman."<sup>29</sup> The writer George Bernard Shaw was also an active music critic who reviewed several performances of Smyth's works. He described Smyth's four-movement Serenade as "very neat and dainty, this orchestral filigree work, but it is not in its right place on occasions [such as this]."<sup>30</sup>

Such comments became a recurring theme in the critical reception of Smyth's works and have been taken up by scholars such as Eugene Gates, who discusses "sexual aesthetics" as a double standard by which women composers' works were judged. According to Gates, most of Smyth's critics seemed unable to recognize qualities such as charm, grace, power, mastery, strength, etc. without assigning them a gender and evaluating Smyth's abilities as a composer accordingly. If her works could be characterized as powerful or rhythmically

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<sup>29</sup> Smyth, *Impressions That Remained*, 396.

<sup>30</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Bodley Head Shaw: Shaw's Music*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Max Rheinhart, 1981), vol. 2, p. 64, quoted in Eugene Gates, "Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don't: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1997): 65, accessed 2/18/15, DOI: 10.2307/3333472.

driving, then they were said to lack “feminine charm,” as Smyth pointed out. At the same time, more “delicate” works would be dismissed for “not measuring up to the artistic standards of her male colleagues.”<sup>31</sup> The greatest feat from this point of view, Gates argues, would be to compose like a man in spite of being a woman. Gates agrees with another scholar, Judith Tick, that the “correlation between sex and emotive content of a piece” was applied mainly to female composers, while male composers were often judged “objectively” on the basis of musical content and ability alone.<sup>32</sup>

In general, Smyth was fairly well known as a composer during her lifetime. Reviews of her later works are scarcer and tend to present comparisons with earlier works of hers in the same genre (Bonavia compares *Entente Cordiale* to *The Boatswain's Mate*, for example). Nevertheless, several of Smyth's friends were both influential and, she claimed, treated her works as individual products. Sir Thomas Beecham, conductor of the London Philharmonic and managing director of Covent Garden during the 1930s, conducted both her Mass in D and *The Prison* at a festival held in 1933 for her seventy-fifth birthday. Assuming that Beecham did not care for her compositional style, she still praised his “inspired rendering” of her music as an act of friendship.<sup>33</sup>

Based on Smyth's own writings and others', one might see several distinct but overlapping portraits of the same person. There is the portrait of a composer

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<sup>31</sup> Gates, “Damned If You Do,” 68.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Tick, “Women as Professional Musicians in the United States, 1870-1900,” *Yearbook for Inter-American Musical Research* 9 (1973): 115, quoted in Gates, “Damned If You Do,” 68.

<sup>33</sup> Smyth and Crichton, *The Memoirs*, 354.

whose style changed direction and diversified over time, due in part to her own physical interpretation of sounds and how her hearing loss changed (but did not stop) her creative output. Furthermore, as Wood suggests, she may have experienced a conflict during the interwar period between her love for the German musical tradition and her British identity, acknowledging a “need to reposition herself in English music and musical society.”<sup>34</sup> The English language dominates the vocal and choral repertoire Smyth produced in the 1920s and 1930s.

To briefly step out of the individual portrait of Ethel Smyth, we can point to experiences she had in common with any other British person whose career had extended internationally during this period. Her trajectory as a composer was changed drastically by World War I, since she lost not only music scores that she had left in Vienna but also future performance opportunities on the Continent. During World War II, Smyth shared with countless other British people the frightening anticipation of air raids, compounded by her deafness: “She was afraid of dying in bed because she would not be able to hear the warning siren for an incoming raid or the bomb before it hit. Or anything much at all.”<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting to consider themes in Smyth’s later works and how they relate to British society during her lifetime. Single women, or women acting on their own, play significant roles in both *The Boatswain’s Mate* and *Entente Cordiale*. In the wake of World War I, many women were widowed or otherwise found themselves in new positions of responsibility. Besides inviting women to reflect on their situation by identifying with her characters, Smyth may have also

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<sup>34</sup> Wood, “On Deafness,” 34.

<sup>35</sup> Wood, “On Deafness,” 41.



hoped that people would consider their value in society regardless of their marital status (would the protagonist in *The Boatswain's Mate* have been happier alone?). Other aspects of her work that may have spoken to her British audiences include the fragmented communication and language barriers in *Entente Cordiale*, as well as its urgent patterns of military commands and bugle calls. Instead of attempting to glorify the battlefield or inviting war-weariness through the medium of a long, tragic opera, Smyth places these memories in a humorous setting.

Smyth enjoyed the most success in writing operas and other larger vocal works. It seems that this success was mostly based on her demonstration of advanced theoretical knowledge (based on her earlier training), her originality in orchestrating and experimenting with form in opera, and her unique personality. Even Smyth's period of relatively low confidence from 1920-1921 was brief and followed by new music that attracted appreciative audiences along with the critics. Her later compositions seem to reflect a more mature style (even in her comedies) and show the depth of the relationships she cultivated with contemporary writers such as Brewster.

We can also view Smyth as a woman composer who largely stayed in control of her career, willing to listen to her male contemporaries but not compromise if she did not think it was necessary. The lull in her compositional output during the 1910s did not merely coincide with her joining the suffragist movement; it was her conscious choice to become politically active, and her music played a valuable role in the movement. Just as she refused to be socially

narrowed when she first lived in Leipzig, she would work as hard as possible to ensure that adaptable circumstances could not limit her work later on.

Moreover, Smyth's life points to the impossibility of defining any single role for the woman composer. Women's activities, employment, and artistic life were evolving during the first half of the twentieth century as they never had before. Thus, the sources of inspiration available to a woman composer, as well as her opportunities, were constantly in flux. As an activist, Smyth insisted on women's creative potential by demanding not only her own right to be heard as a composer but also women's right to vote and take on a variety of roles not assigned to them by society. A woman of artistic sensitivity and strength, she harnessed her musical talent to express herself and her relationship to the events of her time.

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