



A portrait of Dame Ethel Smyth by John Singer Sargent.

Smyth, Dame Ethel (1858-1944)

by Tamsin Wilton

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Ethel (or Ethyl) Smyth was the most important female composer in early twentieth-century English music and one of the few significant English composers of opera of either sex. In addition to six operas, composed between 1894 and 1925, she also wrote chamber ensemble works and the *Mass in D* (1891).

Thomas Beecham thought *The Wreckers* (1904) "one of the three or four English operas of real musical merit and vitality"; and Queen Victoria invited Smyth to perform at Balmoral. She was created Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1922.

Born on April 23, 1858 into a military family, Smyth grew up as a tom-boy. Her family traveled back and forth from England to India during her childhood, an experience that developed her love of travel and adventure.

In defiance of her father's wishes, at age nineteen Smyth fought to be allowed to study music at Leipzig, where she became friends with Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Clara Schumann, and Grieg.

Women musicians were subject to such discrimination that she was forced to rely on influential patrons, such as the Empress Eugénie, to get her music performed. "Let it be pointed out," she wrote, "that very few girls happen to live next door to rich empresses of pronounced feministic sympathies."

Smyth's class privilege made it easy for her to be an unapologetic lesbian. At the end of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, the cult of the creative artist was very much alive in European culture, and sexual flamboyance was tolerated, or even expected of such sensitive souls.

Smyth considered herself part of an informal queer freemasonry of artists, writers and musicians, including Proust, Cocteau, Romaine Brooks, Serge Diaghilev, Violet Trefussis, Radclyffe Hall, and Oscar Wilde (to whose brother she became briefly engaged during a railway journey).

Smyth's love life was a series of grand lesbian passions. Many were fully reciprocated, while others--such as the deep crush she developed in her seventies on a much younger Virginia Woolf--probably were not.

She spent ten strange years with Harry Brewster, brother-in-law of her then lover, Lisl von Herzogenberg, but this seems to have been her single anomalous heterosexual affair. She wrote to him, "I wonder why it is so much easier for me to love my own sex passionately, rather than yours? . . . I am a very healthy-minded person, and it is an everlasting puzzle."

Smyth's passion fueled a determined feminism. She fought tirelessly for women in music, urging female musicians and composers to "swear that unless women are given equal chances with men in the orchestra and unless women's work features in your programmes, *you will make things very disagreeable indeed.*"

She became a key figure in the fight for women's suffrage, composing music for *The March of Women*, the

anthem of the Women's Social and Political Union.

Smyth spent two months in Holloway prison for smashing the window of the Colonial Secretary during a suffragist demonstration. Thomas Beecham recounted seeing "the noble company of martyrs" marching round the prison courtyard singing Smyth's *March*, while she conducted them with a toothbrush from her cell window.

Typically, she fell passionately in love with suffragist leader Emmeline Pankhurst, and there is some evidence that this love was reciprocated.

Smyth's love for women was integral to her passion for female equality, and both her political work and lesbian desire are reflected in her operas and other compositions. She wrote, "I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put to sea."

Smyth died on May 8, 1944, having become an inspirational figure in feminist and lesbian history.

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About the Author

Tamsin Wilton was Reader in Sociology at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She published widely on lesbian and gay issues since 1988, and visited many countries to lecture on lesbian studies and on the sociology of HIV/AIDS. Her books include *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*; *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*; and *Sexualities in Health and Social Care*.