Preface to Ethel Smyth, *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin (Ophelia’s Song)*

Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) was a pathbreaking British composer, writer, and suffragette. At a young age she determined to study music composition in Germany, entering the Leipzig Conservatorium in 1877 and subsequently receiving private tuition under Heinrich von Herzogenberg. She remained in Continental Europe for over ten years, becoming acquainted with leading musical figures including Brahms, Clara Schumann, Joachim, Grieg, and Chaikovsky. In the decades following her return to England, she drew attention from influential patrons such as Empress Eugénie, Queen Victoria, and Princess de Polignac, and her works were championed by several prominent members of the music profession, notably Thomas Beecham and Donald Tovey.

Having fallen under the influence of Emmeline Pankhurst in 1910, Smyth devoted the next two years of her life to women’s suffrage, becoming a leading member of the “Votes for Women” movement and even serving a jail sentence for smashing the window of a cabinet secretary’s private residence. In later years, increasing deafness and distorted hearing led her to develop secondary activity as a writer of memoirs, biographical sketches, and polemical essays on the contemporary music profession and the place of women within it. Recognition of her remarkable achievements came in the form of honorary doctorates from the Universities of Durham and Oxford, as well as the award of DBE in 1922.

In the course of her musical career, Smyth broke much new ground within a profession that had hitherto largely excluded women as composers. Her reputation rests largely on substantial works such as her Mass in D (1891), Double Concerto for violin, horn, and orchestra (1926), the oratorio *The Prison* (1929–30), and her six operas, which include *Der Wald* (1899–1901), *The Wreckers* (1902–04), and *The Boatswain’s Mate* (1913–14). However, her contributions to the vocal, chamber, and solo keyboard repertories are also significant. Of her handful of chamber works, the String Quintet, Violin Sonata, and Cello Sonata, all products of her time in Germany during the 1880s, continue to be performed and studied, as does her later String Quartet (1902–12).

Composed between 1925 and 1927, *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin (Ophelia’s Song)* for flute, oboe, and piano was one of Smyth’s final works, alongside *The Prison*, her brass fanfare *Hot Potatoes* (1930), and her Prelude on a Traditional Irish Air for organ (published in 1939). Notwithstanding her hearing difficulties, which were very pronounced by this time, Smyth continued to write music throughout the 1920s while maintaining her parallel literary career. With its modernist idiom, modal harmonies, and frequent musical flourishes including piano glissandi, *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin* demonstrates a level of innovation and creativity remarkable for a composer then approaching the age of 70, whose formal training had been undertaken half a century previously.

The ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ theme is an English folksong, also known by the title ‘My Robin is to the Greenwood Gone’, for which the original words have not survived. It has long been identified with the character of Ophelia from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which, amidst her singing of fragments of songs on bawdy subjects and themes of death as a symptom of her descent into madness, Ophelia offers up the line ‘For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy’ (Act 4, Scene 5),
generally assumed to be the song’s final phrase. Shakespeare had been a source of inspiration for Smyth’s music from her *Overture to Antony and Cleopatra* (1890), which was among her earliest works for orchestra as well as one of her first pieces to receive performance in her home country. The multiple references to Shakespeare in Smyth’s prose writings also reveal a strong appreciation for his output, consonant with her having parenthetically named Ophelia in the full title of her *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin*. The hero of the song’s title, meanwhile, possesses long-standing associations with the Robin Hood legend, a popular subject in traditional English ballads.

The use of variation form itself is comparatively rare in Smyth’s output, although several of her final scores explicitly take pre-existing music as the basis for original composition, in which respect they are reminiscent of her most famous work, the suffragette anthem *The March of the Women* (1910), which she had fashioned after an Abruzzi folksong. In *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin*, Smyth departed from traditions established by a number of English composers contemporary with Shakespeare who had written music on the same melody, including lute settings by John Dowland and Thomas Robinson, a ricercare by Thomas Simpson, and variations attributed to William Byrd, John Bull, Giles Farnaby, and John Mundy, the latter two appearing in *The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. Smyth was likely aware of some of these settings as well, during her own day, Percy Grainger’s freer rendering based on the first four bars of the song, published in 1912 during Grainger’s period based in London, which included a version for flute, cor anglais, and strings.

Smyth’s eight-minute variation set opens with the triple-time Dorian ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ melody based in E, *Andante lirico*, presented by the oboe (bar 1), with initially modest chordal accompaniment from the piano. With its final phrase repeated, the theme is only slightly modified from the form in which it appears in the earliest extant sources for the melody in the years around the turn of the seventeenth century. The piano takes over this tune for a second presentation (bar 21), while the flute enters with a countermelody, calling to mind the contrapuntal settings of Smyth’s Elizabethan precursors. In the ensuing passage, fragments of ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ are disguised in the bass of the piano (bar 45), before its final phrase on flute leads to a cantabile oboe melody (bar 61) with *legatissimo* triplet quaver piano accompaniment. Then follows a variation on the theme (bar 83) shared between oboe and flute, diminished and broken up by semiquaver rests but nonetheless readily recognisable.

The emphatic end of this section by unison flute and oboe heralds a key change to the major (bar 97), a standard device in variation sets, in which triplet semiquaver flourishes alternating between flute and piano accompany another embellishment of the theme on oboe. Some further reminiscences of the ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ melody, initially on flute (bar 119), take the music back to the home key (bar 131) and introduce a mysterious *pianissimo* passage in which flute and oboe imitate one another, while the piano accompanies with rapid arpeggios and *tremoli*. The music builds to a climax (bar 147) at which point the piano takes over the theme, quickly abating to yield a pastoral *dolce* melody (bar 155) from which the latter half of ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ twice emerges (bar 171, bar 184), transferring from the bass line of the piano to the woodwind instruments. A passage juxtaposing piano left-hand *ad libitum senza ritmo* with the rest of the ensemble in strict time (bar 188) leads to a final return of the theme on flute (bar 205), echoed by
obo. Its culminating phrase is then extended, *sostenuto* (bar 221), by the oboe to end the piece in the major.

While Smyth’s overt political activity as a suffragette had ceased well over a decade previously, *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin* demonstrates the continuation of her resistance to patriarchal hegemony, here represented by established traditions of the overwhelmingly male-dominated field of music composition. In her appropriation of ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ – with its rich history of settings by male composers, coupled to its associations with both Shakespeare and Robin Hood – to serve her own musical agenda, she struck at the heart of England’s androcentric artistic canons as well as its folklore. Moreover, Smyth’s piece (unlike those of her predecessors) simultaneously commemorates the literary trope of the tragic female in its tribute to Shakespeare’s Ophelia, whose dependency on patriarchal domination, encapsulated by the important line ‘For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy’, ultimately leads to her insanity and death.

In this respect, the prevalence of oboe as the instrument that carries the ‘Bonny Sweet Robin’ melody throughout Smyth’s setting is significant. Just a few years previously, in her earliest volumes of memoirs, *Impressions That Remain* (1919), Smyth had recollected that Brahms – who apparently held that everybody has their counterpart among the orchestral instruments – had designated her ‘the Oboe’, doubtless mindful of her mezzo-soprano singing voice. Might the oboe in *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin* therefore be taken to represent the composer herself, the challenge it posed to the norms of the musical patriarchy reflecting Smyth’s own defiance (as a woman pursuing a professional career, a former suffragette, and also a lesbian) to being defined by the conventions of male-dominated society?

*Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin* is one of just two of Smyth’s works scored for flute, oboe, and piano. The other is the shorter *Two Interlinked French Folk Melodies*, an arrangement by the composer of the ‘Intermezzo’ from Act I of her final opera, *Entente cordiale* (1923–24), which exists in versions for several different instrumental combinations. In each case, violin or viola may be substituted for oboe, the instrument originally intended. Both pieces were first performed at Wigmore Hall, London on 11 February 1928 by Albert Fransella (flute), Helen Gaskell (oboe), and Bertram Harrison (piano); *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin* is dedicated to Fransella. Their publication by Oxford University Press, also in 1928, represents the principal source for these scores in the absence of surviving manuscripts.

*Two Interlinked French Folk Melodies* is notable among Smyth’s works for having enjoyed lasting popularity, even receiving performance in its orchestral version at the Last Night of the Proms in 1958, the year that marked the centenary of the composer’s birth. *Variations on Bonny Sweet Robin*, while less well-known, is no less deserving of public attention given Smyth’s inventive treatment of its charming theme and her imaginative use of instrumental colour. It is still sometimes to be found on concert programmes; one recent performance was given by Isabella Stocchetti (flute), Christopher Wiley (oboe), and Margaret Roberts (piano) at a concert of Smyth’s music in Woking, where the composer was resident for over three decades, on 8 May 2014 to mark the 70th anniversary of her death.

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