Ethel Smyth, Music, and the Suffragette Movement: Reconsidering *The Boatswain’s Mate* as Feminist Opera

Abstract

The recent release of the first complete recording of Ethel Smyth's *The Boatswain’s Mate* (1913–14) (Retrospect Opera, 2016), its staging by Toronto-based Opera 5 as part of the double-bill *Suffragette* (2017), and the upcoming centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act invite reconsideration of the relationship between this opera, the broadly contemporaneous leading suffragette activity of its composer-librettist, and feminism. Previous scholarship by Wood (1995) and Wiley (2004) that has explored similar ground has not gone so far as to call into question the popularly-held supposition that the work constitutes a ‘feminist opera’, made primarily on the basis of the overture’s liberally quoting two of Smyth’s own suffrage songs (‘1910’ and ‘The March of the Women’) instead of the conventional assortment of themes from the score itself, coupled to the suggestion that the opera’s female protagonist was modelled on Emmeline Pankhurst, with whom Smyth had maintained a close (some believe lesbian) relationship.

My paper subjects this headline claim to renewed critical scrutiny, investigating factors including the extent of the indebtedness of Smyth’s libretto to the short story by W.W. Jacobs (from *Captains All*, 1905) in which it originated; Smyth’s creative process, about which she wrote at length in her auto/biographical books *A Final Burning of Boats Etc.* (1928) and *Beecham and Pharaoh* (1935); and her practice of drawing upon pre-existing music at several significant junctures in the score, including the heroine’s central aria ‘What if I were young again’ which is based on the traditional British ballad ‘Lord Randall’, a dialogue between a mother and the son who has been poisoned by his beloved.

Biography

Christopher Wiley is Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Surrey. He is the author of articles appearing in *The Musical Quarterly, Music and Letters, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, and *Comparative Criticism*, and is an acknowledged expert on Ethel Smyth, the subject of two journal articles, CD liner notes, and many conference papers and public talks. His doctoral dissertation, *Re-writing*
Composers’ Lives: Critical Historiography and Musical Biography, undertaken at the University of London, provides a critical examination of musical biography through comparative studies of texts on several canonical composers. He is currently preparing a monograph on the earliest volumes of the ‘Master Musicians’ series (1899-1906), as well as a co-edited volume on Musical Biography: Ideology, Narrative, and Myth. Chris’s other research interests include music and gender studies, popular music studies, music for television, and learning and teaching in higher education. He is also Publicity Officer for Retrospect Opera.