Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) – *The Wreckers* – ‘On the Cliffs of Cornwall’ (Prelude to Act 2) (1902–4)

The third of Ethel Smyth’s six operas, *The Wreckers*, was her most ambitious and monumental, given its three acts and generous musical resources. It was inspired by a walking holiday of Cornwall and the Scilly Isles in 1886, during which Smyth encountered folk stories of villagers luring ships on to the rocks to plunder their cargo. The libretto, by her close friend Henry Brewster, written in French as *Les naufrageurs*, incorporated a subplot involving two young lovers who light coastal beacons to warn these ships away.

Attempts to secure a French-language production having proven fruitless, the opera was translated into German (as *Strandrecht*) and first performed in Leipzig in 1906; the English stage premiere took place three years later. Both the overture to *The Wreckers* and the Prelude to Act 2, ‘On the Cliffs of Cornwall’, enjoyed success as concert pieces independently of the opera, including many performances at the Proms during Smyth’s lifetime.

*The Wreckers* is often said to anticipate Britten’s *Peter Grimes*, seen in the similarities between ‘On the Cliffs of Cornwall’ and the latter’s ‘Four Sea Interludes’. Smyth’s opera embodies German influences (Wagner is frequently cited) consonant with her Leipzig-based training, but also those from France, reflecting the original language of the libretto and the patronage the composer received from the Princesse de Polignac, to whom ‘On the Cliffs of Cornwall’ was dedicated. Its harp flourishes and lush writing for strings evoke the ebb and flow of the sea, punctuated by the cries of gulls overhead, while a scene-setting section led by oboe calls to mind the vast expanse of the Cornish coastline.

*Programme note © Christopher Wiley*
Ethel Smyth, pathbreaking composer, writer and suffragette, was one of eight children born into a military family that came to be based in Surrey. Her father, a Major-General, initially opposed her plans to take up composition professionally, but ultimately permitted her to relocate to Leipzig in 1877 to enrol at its celebrated Conservatory. Leaving the following year to continue her training privately with the pedagogue Heinrich von Herzogenberg, it was in Germany that Smyth wrote much of her chamber music, including sonatas for violin (1887) and cello (1887), and all of her piano works (c1877–80). While on the Continent, she also became acquainted with musical luminaries of the day such as Brahms, Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Clara Schumann.

Circumstances necessitated Smyth’s permanent return to England in late 1889, where she soon secured performances of large-scale pieces including her *Serenade* (1890), *Overture to Shakespeare’s ‘Antony and Cleopatra’* (1890), and Mass in D (1891). Pursuing her aspirations to write opera, in the ensuing years she issued forth *Fantasio* (1892–4), *Der Wald* (1899–1901), and her grand opera *The Wreckers* (1902–4). With *Der Wald*, in 1903 Smyth became the first (and, for over a century, the only) female composer to have her work presented at New York’s Metropolitan Opera.

Smyth’s life was to take an unexpected direction in September 1910: having heard Emmeline Pankhurst speak and been enchanted by her, she pledged two years to the women’s suffrage cause, even serving a sentence in Holloway Prison for her militant deeds. Her song ‘The March of the Women’ (1910), quickly adopted as the suffragette anthem, is the most famous of several vocal works from this period. Resuming her musical career in earnest, Smyth moved to Egypt to compose her next opera, *The Boatswain’s Mate* (1913–14). She also turned increasingly to prose writing at this time, and the first of her 10 books – a
combination of memoirs, biographical sketches, and polemics on the male-dominated music profession – was published in 1919.

The following decade saw Smyth compose her final two operas, *Fête galante* (1921–2) and *Entente cordiale* (1923–4), as well as a Concerto for Violin and Horn (1927) and her oratorio *The Prison* (1929–30). Recognition of her remarkable artistic achievements came in the form of her DBE, awarded in 1922, as well as several honorary degrees. The progressive deterioration of her hearing essentially spelled the end of her musical activities in her advanced years, but she continued to write memoirs. Smyth’s compositions have enjoyed sporadic revivals in recent times, receiving renewed attention in 2018, the centenary year of the Representation of the People Act that granted the parliamentary vote to many women in Britain, acknowledging her service as a leading suffragette.

*Profile © Christopher Wiley*

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