Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) – Mass in D (1891, rev. 1924)

Smyth’s return to England at the end of 1889, following a period of over a decade of musical
activity based in Germany, was coincident with her brief turn to the Anglican church.
Emblematic of this short-lived conversion is her Mass in D, a large-scale setting of the
Ordinary dedicated to her musical and devoutly Catholic friend Pauline Trevelyan, whose
influence had enabled Smyth to reconnect with her faith. As she recalled in her memoirs,
‘Into that work I tried to put all there was in my heart, but no sooner was it finished than,
strange to say, orthodox belief fell away from me, never to return’.

The majority of her Mass had been composed in the company of the Empress
Eugénie, the widow of Napoleon III living out her exile as Smyth’s near-neighbour, when
residing in her villa at Cap Martin in south-east France and cruising the Adriatic Sea on her
yacht. The Empress had shown particular interest in the Mass, financing the work’s
publication and even consenting to make an official appearance for the first time in years
were it to be performed. Moreover, while staying with the Empress on the Balmoral estate in
Scotland in October 1891, she contrived for Smyth to perform extracts from the work to the
Royal Family, ‘after the manner of composers, which means singing the chorus as well as the
solo parts, and trumpeting forth orchestral effects as best you can’, apparently to the delight
of Queen Victoria. It was this event, together with the Mass’s having separately been brought
to the attention of the Duke of Edinburgh (who was President of the Royal Choral Society) by
the husband of Smyth’s influential friend Lady Mary Ponsonby, that ultimately led to its
performance.

Smyth’s Mass in D was premièred on 18 January 1893 at the Royal Albert Hall,
alongside parts of Haydn’s The Creation (1796–8), by the Royal Choral Society and Royal
Albert Hall Orchestra under Joseph Barnby, who had found the work ‘disjointed, over-
exuberant, and unnatural’. Some last-minute rescoring notwithstanding, Smyth reportedly had difficulty recognising the ‘exquisite orchestral sonorities’ as her own work when listening backstage to the final rehearsal. While she felt that the performance had been first rate, the press reviews were more variable, and the Mass was repeatedly passed over for a second performance both in England and abroad.

It was not until 7 February 1924 that the work enjoyed a revival in revised form. Lamenting what she described as the ‘burying alive of that Mass for over thirty years’, Smyth related that she had ‘almost forgotten its existence, but [...] looked it up, and found to my amazement that I should improbably do anything better’. Its second performance was the consequence of Smyth’s having written to Novello, the original publisher, and of Henry Wood’s convincing Birmingham Festival Choir to present the work, under the baton of Adrian Boult, who repeated it the following week at Queen’s Hall, London. Further revivals followed, including another at the Royal Albert Hall on 3 March 1934 conducted by Thomas Beecham, with the composer seated alongside Queen Mary, as the culmination of a series of concerts and BBC broadcasts to mark the composer’s 75th birthday.

The Mass opens with an extensive ‘Kyrie eleison’ that builds gradually from the solemn choral strains initially presented by the basses. In contrast, the lengthy ‘Credo’ commences jubilantly, alternating between dramatic full chorus sections and more tranquil passages for the four vocal soloists. The ‘Sanctus’, ‘Benedictus’, and ‘Agnus Dei’ feature the alto, soprano, and tenor soloists, respectively, variously accompanied by the chorus. All are shorter movements, yielding more intimate, beautiful textures. The work culminates with an expansive ‘Gloria’, which the composer suggested performing as the final movement rather than in its conventional place within the liturgy, so as to enable a triumphant climax.

Between the original version and its revival in the 1920s, Smyth’s Mass retains a special place in the composer’s output, being one of the works on which her reputation
principally rests. In the second edition of *Grove's Dictionary*, J.A. Fuller Maitland wrote that ‘This work definitely placed [Smyth] among the most eminent composers of her time’, describing it as ‘virile, masterly in construction and workmanship, and particularly remarkable for the excellence and rich colouring of the orchestration’. Donald Francis Tovey’s influential *Essays in Musical Analysis* includes a discussion of the piece in which it is compared to Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* (1819–23), also in the key of D. Its revival prompted George Bernard Shaw to remark to the composer that ‘It was your music that cured me for ever of the old delusion that women could not do man’s work in art [...] Your Mass will stand up in the biggest company! Magnificent!’ The soprano solo of the ‘Benedictus’ movement was performed at the memorial service held for Smyth at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London on 5 June 1944.

*Programme note © Christopher Wiley*
Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944)

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, Horn, and Orchestra (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*

Christopher Wiley is Senior Lecturer in Music at the University of Surrey. His extensive research on Ethel Smyth has led to journal articles, liner notes and other essays, as well as many public lectures. He is also Publicity Officer for Retrospect Opera, whose recordings catalogue includes Smyth’s *The Wreckers* and *The Boatswain’s Mate*. 