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A Voice of Her Own

Ethel Smyth and Early Feminist Musicology

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts
at the University of Otago, Dunedin,
New Zealand.

August 1999
Throughout her life Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) fought to be recognised as a professional composer in her own right, regardless of her gender. From an early age Smyth had an awareness of the potential difficulties facing women musicians and she experienced much prejudice throughout her career. She used her own experiences as the foundation for her feminist beliefs which she expressed in her essays on women in music and in her autobiographical writings. However, her ideas have not been acknowledged, and her views have been to some extent ridiculed and ignored.

An examination of Smyth’s views on women in music reveals an acute awareness of her situation as a woman in a male-dominated profession. In her writings she articulated the processes by which she felt women were excluded from the profession, and in her later writings she concluded that the expression of a “female voice” in women’s music was the cause for exclusion. Furthermore, her writings anticipate a number of observations and beliefs which have become central to the discipline of feminist musicology.

The first chapter examines Smyth’s life and career, focusing on the experiences and conditions that helped formulate her feminist beliefs. Chapter two examines Smyth’s portrayal in history and argues that her historical representation perpetuates the idea that her feminist writings are of little importance. Chapters three and four demonstrate that her essays reflected feminist beliefs of the period and represented the reality experienced by many women composers. The final chapter compares modern feminist musicology with Smyth’s writings, arguing that many of her theories anticipate the central arguments of feminist musicology.
I would like to express my thanks to Dr Suzanne Court for her invaluable assistance and encouragement during the preparation of this thesis. Many thanks to Sally Bodkin, for reading the thesis and providing excellent feedback, and also for our stimulating discussions during the last year. Thanks also to my colleagues, friends, and family for sharing my enthusiasm for Ethel Smyth!
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A text which we discover in some dusty archive is not good and interesting just because a woman wrote it. It is good and interesting because it enables us to come to new conclusions about women's literary tradition; to come to new insights about how a woman copes in a literary form with her social position, the expectations attached to her role as woman, her fears, desires and fantasies, and which strategies she developed in order to express herself publicly in spite of the confinement in the personal and private.

"What I wanted to do was to make it clear that for centuries women have been saying many of the things we are saying today and which we have often thought of as new."  

Ethel Smyth’s recognition as composer, author and feminist has suffered from neglect. Music historians have predominantly disregarded her music, and her essays on women in music have been largely dismissed as the “ranting” of a minor composer expressing bitterness about her apparent mistreatment. The aim of this dissertation is to read her feminist essays from the perspective of modern feminist musicology, and thus reinterpret her career and work.

In this dissertation I argue that Smyth’s essays represented experiences of many of her contemporaneous women composers and that they anticipate a number of theses which have become central to the discipline of feminist musicology. Furthermore, I posit that her essays have considerably influenced the work of some prominent present-day feminist musicologists.

Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) was the fourth of eight children born into an upper-middle class military family. Smyth’s mother was highly musical; singing and performing at the piano was an important aspect of Smyth’s childhood. Her early musical education was limited to piano lessons with her governess and a limited number of harmony lessons with Alexander Ewing (an army lieutenant stationed at Aldershot). Her father developed opposition to her growing interest in a professional music career and did all he could to discourage her from studying. He did not view the serious study of music as suitable for his daughter. Ultimately, however, he was unable to prevent her from enrolling in 1877, at the age of nineteen, at the Leipzig Conservatory of Music.

She spent much of the next thirteen years in Germany and became acquainted with many of the leading figures of European music including Brahms, Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Clara Schumann. She returned permanently to England in 1890

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and as well as having two orchestral works performed that year – the *Serenade in D* and the *Overture to Antony and Cleopatra* – she began work on the *Mass in D* which was first performed in 1893.

Encouraged by Hermann Levi to write an opera, Smyth began work on *Fantasio*, the first of three operas to receive their premiere performance in Germany. In total she wrote six operas, all of which received performances during her lifetime. The scores of *Fantasio* (1899) Smyth destroyed after its first season but *Der Wald* (1902) and *The Wreckers* (1906) received performances in both Germany and England, with *Der Wald* having the distinction of being the first opera by a woman to be performed at the New York Metropolitan Opera. The final three operas, *The Boatswain's Mate* (1915), *Fête Galante* (1923) and *Entente Cordiale* (1925) were written in the comic genre which she believed was more suited to the English temperament. These were premiered in England. She wrote two other large-scale works: the *Double Concerto for Violin, Horn and Orchestra* (1926) and *The Prison* (1930) (a symphony for soprano and bass solo, chorus and orchestra).

Smyth also composed a small amount of chamber music, most of which gained a favourable reception. In the 1920s she began conducting her own works, and while she received a mixed response from performers and critics, her music was apparently well received by audiences.

She received a number of honorary awards during her career: in 1910 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Music from Durham University, in 1922 she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and in 1926 she was awarded a Honorary Doctorate of Music from Oxford. In a final tribute to her musical achievements many of her major works were performed in a festival in 1934 in celebration of her 75th birthday (which took place a year after her actual birthday). This festival was supported by the BBC and many major musical figures and gave her the sort of recognition she had been seeking all her life.

Throughout her life Ethel Smyth defied many socially accepted conventions for women of her background and generation: she insisted on studying to become a professional composer, she did not marry, she established an ambiguous image of gender and sexuality by dressing and behaving mannishly, and she operated professionally in a male dominated environment. Many biographies and studies of Smyth stress her eccentricity, portraying (sometimes in caricature) her style of dress, her behaviour, her liking for golf and hunting, her forceful personality and her (assumed) lesbian sexuality. By deviating from prescribed feminine roles Smyth attracted attention which served her both positively and negatively. Posthumously her personality has taken centre stage, to the detriment of the assessment of her musical and literary oeuvre.
Ethel Smyth occupied a position which was somewhat unlike that of many of her predecessors and contemporaries. Although, unlike Clara Wieck (Schumann) and Fanny Mendelssohn, she was not born into a professional musical family she gained professional status as a composer and conductor. She achieved this at a time when women were generally restricted to domestic singing and piano playing. Studying in the Leipzig Conservatory – a decision unsupported by family – gave her both the opportunity to train with composers and the courage to aspire to professionalism. She resisted the traditional feminine role of composer-performer and focused on becoming a professional composer within a patriarchal profession. Unlike most composers of the period she did not perform her own music publicly, which would have facilitated the promotion of her own compositions. However this did free her, to some degree at least, from the conventions and restrictions imposed on the woman performer.

A prolific writer, she published a total of ten books, including three volumes of autobiography. Her other writings comprised mainly of autobiographical and biographical sketches, travel stories, and essays on music. All of her books are characterised by a strong autobiographical viewpoint. As her friend Vita Sackville-West commented: "Her letters and her books are all the same. They are HER. She might concisely have entitled her successive books ME ONE, ME TWO, ME THREE and so on." This is valid comment; nonetheless, her books also serve as vital social commentary. She was widely read in her lifetime and was well known as both author and composer. Subsequently, however, her writings have not received the same level of attention as her music. Her essays on music – particularly those on women and music – have been interpreted as personal complaint toward her status within the musical milieu in England rather than as commentary on the position of women in music, about which she was equally passionate.

From an early age Smyth had an awareness of the potential difficulties facing women musicians and she remained acutely aware of these factors throughout her career. As a woman in a patriarchal profession (and at a time when composition was not considered a suitable profession for women) Smyth experienced the prejudices and difficulties which all women musicians in Europe faced, however, she was one of the most active in articulating them. After joining the Women’s Social and Political Union in 1910 she applied feminist theory to an interpretation of her own experiences as a woman composer in a male dominated field. From this time the issue of being a woman in the world of music, and feminism in general, became a central part of her writing and of her public life. She recognised that access to education and professional opportunities was not equal to both sexes,

identifying this as the major reason why women had not achieved prominence in composition and performance. She perceived that women were limited by prejudice and discrimination which prevented them from gaining access to all avenues of professional musical life. Smyth also recognised that women were poorly represented in music history books, which compounded the problem of an absence of role models for successive generations of women composers.

During the time she was involved with the suffrage movement, and especially while she was in Holloway Prison, Smyth forged a belief in a women’s culture. She found considerable personal support from such a women’s culture, and this reinforced her belief that essential differences existed between men and women.

All my life ... I have found in women’s affection a peculiar understanding, mothering quality that is a thing apart. Perhaps too I had a foreknowledge of the difficulties that in a world arranged by man for man’s convenience beset the woman who leaves the traditional path to compete for bread and butter, honours and emoluments – difficulties honest men are more aware of, perhaps, than she of the sheltered life. I had no theories about it then but I think I guessed it.³

Smyth believed in a distinct social group of women which was denied full franchise and which suffered prejudice and role restriction. This idea of a supportive community of women retaining a measure of independence from men remained a consistent thread in her feminism and her theories of women in music. Viewing women as a group with a unique culture led her to form theories on how women might create, and respond to, music. More particularly, she believed that woman had a distinctive “voice” in music – a recognisable style and mode of communication.

In this dissertation I give several readings of Smyth’s writings. In chapter one I examine the sociological conditions of the society in which Smyth grew up and the conditions and experiences which assisted in the formulation of her feminist beliefs. I focus on issues and events in her career which were pivotal to the development of her views. Essential in tracing the development of Smyth’s feminist theories is her perception of her experiences as a woman composer and her reaction to particular events.

In chapter two I examine Smyth’s historical reception, demonstrating how her representation has focused mainly on the “extra-musical” aspects of her life and career, thus belittling her feminist writings. Music historians have had difficulty assessing her career because she broke so many norms, not the least of which were her outspoken publications focusing on uncomfortable gender issues. In this

discussion I demonstrate how her historical representation perpetuates the idea that her feminist writings were of little significance.

Assessing whether Smyth’s arguments mirror the social situation for other women composers and writers is the focus of chapter three. My thesis is that her views are representative of contemporaneous feminist thought, and are the product of a complex social and political environment. I refute the notion that her arguments are invalidated by personal experience.

In chapter four I examine how her theories of gender difference, of a women’s voice in music, and of professionalism (later called the musical canon) were informed by feminist thinking of the 1920s and 1930s.

In the final chapter I examine theories of modern feminist musicology and compare them with Smyth’s writings. There are demonstrable similarities, and it is my thesis that Ethel Smyth’s feminist music theory anticipates future musicological thought to which it has subsequently become central.
Essential to an understanding of the significance of Ethel Smyth's life, and of her career as a woman composer, is placement of her biography within the specific social conditions of upper middle class Victorian Britain.

She developed views on her position within the professional musical world, and views of women's place within the world, over a long period of time. Certainly as a young adult she was precocious in her determination to forge a professional path for herself from within a family environment which was hostile to serious artistic endeavours, especially those which might lead to professionalism.

Although educational and professional pathways in music were available to women, even if seriously limited, the educational, legal, and social position for women in Britain changed considerably during Smyth's lifetime (1858-1944). With those changes, particularly in response to the suffrage movement, Smyth's views also changed and adapted.

While it is sometimes assumed that her connection with the suffrage movement was the impetus for her views on women, she had formulated strong views beforehand, particularly concerning the professional woman composer in Europe. Certainly her views were clarified during the suffrage period and, indeed, she contributed to the movement in no small way. In addition to her musical output, it was her involvement in the movement, and her friendships with leading writers and thinkers of the period, which ensure Ethel Smyth a memorable place in history. It is especially fortunate for historians that she was a prolific writer, even if not a particularly skilful one, and that she was not short of opinion on a large variety of concerns.

Smyth's family background, with its open hostility to professionalism in music, encapsulated prevailing Victorian attitudes to a woman's place in society. Her defiance of such attitudes was expressed in her determination to become a professional composer. In her studies she encountered difficulties peculiar to her gender, and in her early professional life, even more so. Ambition in her early years
was thwarted by the prevailing educational opportunities available for girls, and she found little choice for an educationally satisfying music conservatory. Later, as a young professional, she had difficulty in obtaining performances and publications.

The focal points of this chapter are the contextualising of Smyth's career, tracing the politicising of her views on women in society and of women composers, and her adaptation to the outspoken views.

Mid-Victorian prescriptive ideology and attitudes to women considerably affected Smyth's upbringing. Separate spheres dominated Victorian ideology. Victorian life was divided into a public sphere for men, comprising politics, business and industrial affairs while women inhabited a private sphere limited to domestic matters and were excluded from occupations outside the home. Women became defined by, and limited to, a domestic role of providing a sanctuary in the home. Susan Kingsley Kent writes that the "so-called inherent qualities of femininity: emotion, passivity, submission, dependence, and selflessness, all derived, it was claimed insistently, from women's sexual and reproductive organisation."¹ This justified limitation to the private sphere. Assumptions about innate characteristics of the sexes pictured the woman as delicate, fragile and weak. Early Victorian manuals for middle-class girls gave advice on correct behaviour, on limits and restraints and on recognising male superiority. Such inferiority as expressed in Sara Stickney Ellis's writings of 1843, and many others, was unquestioned and was tied to new scientific discoveries which attempted to prove women's innate weakness: "As women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men – inferior in mental power, in the same proportion as you are inferior in bodily strength."² The developing field of biology in the nineteenth century enabled commentators to give scientific "evidence" to justify women's inferior position and to reinforce traditional values and the romantic view of women as intuitive and irrational. Scientists claimed that the psychological and cultural differences between men and women derived from male and female biology; therefore the role of women could not be challenged. Many stressed instead that the biological differences between men and women should be reflected and celebrated in the roles assigned to them in society.³

Ray Strachey, writing in her 1928 study of the women's movement in Great Britain, described the relationship between men and women, and women's function and role in society in the mid nineteenth century:

³ Kent. Sex and Suffrage: 35
It was generally agreed to be one of the self-evident laws of nature that men were superior to women—mentally, physically and morally. Education, therefore, would be wasted upon them; responsibility would overwhelm them, and work would make them ill. They must be sheltered, protected and indulged—so the theory ran.\(^4\)

Such "protection" came in the form of marriage for middle- and upper-class women, which was seen as both the proper role and an economic necessity. Because women were not allowed to own property until after the reform laws of 1882, and because it was unacceptable for women of the middle- and upper-classes to work, marriage was the Victorian woman's main means of support. So strong was the ideology of the woman's role as wife and mother that the increase in the number of single women in the mid nineteenth century presented both an economic and ideological problem.\(^5\) In 1862 W. R. Greg's essay "Why are Women Redundant" examined the situation and suggested these "redundant" women were "unnatural freaks guilty of neglecting their social duty to men."\(^6\) Their very existence raised issues about working women and many of the issues raised also applied to the expanding boundaries of women's philanthropic work. It had become increasingly acceptable for young ladies to engage in some form of charitable work, and as the boundaries of acceptable philanthropic work gradually extended, women increasingly called into question the limits on their education and their legal rights. Attempts to reform married women's property law, education reforms, and calls for women's suffrage often met with conservative responses reasserting beliefs of a woman's "natural" or "innate" characteristics and her role. These challenges to the accepted notions of women's place in Victorian society, often referred to as "The Woman Question," became an important topic of discussion from the 1860s.

The Woman Question debate prompted writings and discussion on both sides of the issue. John Ruskin writing in "Of Queen's Gardens" in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), painted a picture of women as delicate and fragile. He upheld a romantic ideal of separate spheres and an image of the woman designated to limit her function to the home. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (written in 1861, but not published until 1869) was written partly in response to Ruskin's essay and examined and challenged the actual position of women in history.

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5 The Census of 1851 revealed that as many as 30 percent of women between 20 and 40 were unmarried, although there were only six percent more women than men in this age group. Janet Horowitz Murray. *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from 19th-Century England*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982. 48.
The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes - the legal subordination of one sex to the other - is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; ... it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.  

Mill's arguments and his attack on the views of Ruskin opened up the debate on women's education. Mill believed that in terms of education the "mental differences supposed to exist between women and men are but the natural effects of the differences in their education and circumstances, and indicate no radical differences, far less radical inferiority of nature." Mill's writings helped fuel the progress of the women's movement at the time of publication and continued to be important in the suffrage debate throughout the next fifty years.

Women began agitating specifically for the vote in the 1860s and the issue came into greater public attention with a petition in parliament for women's suffrage in 1866. Ideologically, women were excluded from the vote on grounds of their sex. "Governed by their reproductive system, women were thought to be too emotional, too unstable, [and] too lacking in intellectual capacity to participate in running of government." In arguing for their right to vote, women sought not only political equality, but the elimination of the notion of separate spheres, and aimed to alter the perception of women so that they would no longer be objectified or essentially defined by biology.

Smyth grew up in this climate of change in mid Victorian England. While traditional values were still exerted in family life, the changing social climate also enabled some to move beyond conventional boundaries. Smyth came from a conventional Victorian, military family. Her father, Major-General John Hall Smyth, had served in India until the Mutiny in 1857, and had returned to Woolwich. Later the family relocated to Aldershot where Ethel spent most of her childhood. Her mother, Nina Struth, was brought up in Paris and, according to Smyth, was very musical. Ethel was the fourth of eight children, the third eldest daughter of six who were brought up according to Victorian convention. Life comprised a circuit of entertaining, garden parties, country balls, church, and visiting within the country neighbourhood of Frimley. The girls, educated by governesses at home, received the standard education for their time and status while the two boys were sent to school.

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9 Kent. *Sex and Suffrage*: 54.
Girls in middle- and upper-class families were mostly educated at home by governesses, sometimes with a final year at boarding or finishing school. The quality of education received from a governess varied according to her own abilities. It was one of the few socially acceptable occupations by which a woman could support herself and many had no formal training, thus the quality of education she imparted was determined by her own education and aptitude for teaching.\textsuperscript{10} It was not until the establishment of colleges such as Queen’s College (London, 1848) to certify women governesses and to raise their potential earning power, that professional standards were raised.\textsuperscript{11} Smyth described her governesses in \textit{Impressions that Remained} as: “some English, others German ... quite invariably without the faintest notion of making lessons either pleasant or profitable.” She expressed her dislike for the governess system, writing that, “even as a child I vaguely understood how impossible is the position of these poor unwilling intruders in the family circle.”\textsuperscript{12}

In 1872 she and her sister Mary were sent to boarding school in Putney. Her parents were reluctant to send them: “the idea was not readily entertained, for at that time it was not considered the thing to let your girls associate with Heaven knows whom under a strange roof.”\textsuperscript{13} However, the wide range of ages of children at home meant the situation with the governess had become complicated and Smyth’s parents learnt that the daughters of certain aristocratic families attended the school in Putney. It was important to the status of the family that the girls attended a suitable school.

The education which Victorian girls received at home and at school was suited to their role in womanhood: English, and general knowledge in areas of literature, history and geography, and French, music and drawing.\textsuperscript{14} Mathematics and science were taught, but to a lesser degree, and in general a girl’s education focused on home-making skills and feminine refinement, with social values and objectives taking precedence over academic goals. The belief was that a girl’s attitude to learning should remain a feminine one; that she should never be interested in learning for its own sake.\textsuperscript{15} The depth of study in any subject was low, and the tuition a girl received as part of her education in, for example, music would not have prepared her for any professional role. Music teaching focused on proficiency on an instrument to enhance a girl’s femininity and to improve

\textsuperscript{11} Murray. \textit{Strong-Minded Women}: 226.
\textsuperscript{13} Smyth. \textit{Impressions I}: 96.
\textsuperscript{14} Deborah Gorham. \textit{The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal}. London: Croom and Helm, 1982. 23
\textsuperscript{15} Gorham. \textit{The Victorian Girl}: 105.
marriage prospects. She was meant to utilise her skills to entertain in the home. Girls received little or no theoretical training and were discouraged from both taking music too seriously and from developing their skills to a professional level. In *Daughters of England* Sara Ellis wrote that, "a very little skill in music may often be made to answer as noble a purpose as a great deal." Their talents were to be used as a means of enjoyment in the home and not a medium for displaying skill.

Smyth and her sister were taught the usual curriculum of history, literature, mathematics, French and German, as well as music, drawing, astronomy and chemistry by "extras" (Masters) from London. From school they were also taken to concerts, to the Royal Academy of Art, prepared for confirmation, and taught household skills such as darning and care of linen. Smyth's opinion of her education at the school is reflected in her comment in *ImpressionsthatRemained*. "On the whole Mary and I agree that we learned a good deal at Miss D.'s, but I still think among the most important things were being taught how to darn stockings, and how to put clean linen back in the drawers."17

There was much debate in England on girls' and women's education in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some were in favour of raising standards of education for women on the grounds that, "an educated or cultured woman made the best mother, able to pass on the advantages of a trained mind to her offspring" while others argued that, "intellectual education, especially at a 'secondary' or 'higher' level, to be damaging on the grounds that it either disinclined or positively disequipped women for motherhood."18 The latter view was supported by the work of sociologist Herbert Spencer who declared, "increasing reservations about supplying too much intellectual education for women," claiming that over-education and mental strain were causing a reduction in the reproductive abilities of women.19 Views such as this tended to be more prevalent in policy making. However, women education reformers fought to make improvements in education offered to women. In the 1860s and beyond they fought for the chance for women to sit university entrance exams, and later, to be awarded degrees.20

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19 Carol Dyhouse. "Social Darwinistic Ideas": 43.
20 Girton College at Cambridge opened in 1871, the University of London in 1878 and Newnham College at Oxford in 1879 admitted women to examination. Women attending Oxford and Cambridge, however, were not awarded degrees, despite passing the examinations, and were instead given "certificates of degrees." Oxford did not confer degrees on women until 1921. See Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, "Women and Degrees at Cambridge University." In *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*. Edited by Martha Vicinus. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977. 117. The first woman to pass a Bachelor of Music examination was Elizabeth Stirling. Although she passed the examination in 1856 she did not receive the Oxford
From an early age Smyth demonstrated a talent for music. Her mother was very musical, and music making was a part of their home life. Smyth and her sister Mary often performed in public as young girls, playing piano pieces and singing duets which Smyth had written. Music making on this level complied with Victorian ideals of feminine accomplishments and charm. However, in 1870 a governess who had studied at the Leipzig Conservatory introduced her to classical music, in particular Beethoven sonatas, and “a new world opened up before me.” From this influence she decided to study in Leipzig and announced her intention to the family of “giving up my life to music.” Smyth’s father vehemently opposed all of her attempts to study music seriously. In a family of their position it was expected (as it was for her sisters) that music be a decorative ability to advance married life. During the nineteenth century “feminine idleness,” confirmed by the pursuit of artistic occupations including embroidery, handcrafts, drawing or painting, and music, was seen as proof of a family’s social status. Music was considered the most important of the feminine “accomplishments” designed to increase a young lady’s marriage prospects. During the nineteenth century the piano, and the ability of a young lady to play, became a status symbol and an essential requirement of the leisureed upper-middle class. Ladies were advised against acquiring too much technical skill, with the emphasis that an ability to entertain without being showy demonstrated the right combination of ability and feminine charm.

Unlike her sisters, however, Smyth was not content with the limited tuition deemed suitable for young ladies, and determined to study further. When Smyth expressed an interest in studying harmony with Alexander Ewing, a Lieutenant in the Army Service Corps stationed at Aldershot in 1875, her father immediately tried to prevent the lesson taking place. Her father was suspicious of Ewing, and he also questioned the morality of people involved professionally in the arts. This was not an uncommon view for the period. Many considered the performing arts to be unrespectable and associated with dubious morals and the lower classes. Indeed, a woman’s involvement in the performing arts would undermine the social degree. See Jane Bernstein. “Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song! Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer.” In Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150-1950. Edited by Jane Bowers and Judith Tick. London: Macmillan, 1986. 306.

21 Smyth. Impressions I: 89.
22 Smyth. Impressions I: 89.
26 Alexander Ewing (1830-1895). Scottish compose: of secular songs and hymns, including “Jerusalem the Golden.” He entered the army in 1855 and became paymaster and honorary lieutenant-colonel. His wife, Judy, wrote children’s books.
status of a family. Furthermore, Smyth's desire to study harmony indicated her intention to take music beyond the status of decorative accomplishment. Her composition until then had comprised of small piano pieces and drawing-room songs which she and her sisters performed for the amusement of the family. This was acceptable in that it complied with the standards of the day. During the latter part of the nineteenth century the drawing-room ballad and parlour song, reinforced as a "feminine" genre through the predominance of female performers and audiences, became an acceptable composition genre for women musicians. Composers such as Annie Fortescue Harrison (Lady Arthur Hill, composer of In the Gloaming) achieved success in publishing in this genre. However, the association of the ballad and parlour song with "feminine accomplishments" served to lower the status of this genre so that composers of such music were not considered to be serious, a notion that Smyth was to acknowledge throughout her career. By the time she was sent to school Smyth was already "deep in Schumann, Schubert and Beethoven" and had a "contempt for florid music." She took her music very seriously and did not rank her music alongside the lighter genres.

Smyth's desire to study further and to move beyond salon music challenged her family's beliefs of the acceptable role for a woman. After considerable dispute with her father the harmony lessons were allowed to go ahead. Twice a week she attended lessons with Ewing in which she studied harmony, composition and orchestration and had an introduction to Wagner's operas Lohengrin and The Flying Dutchman. She was strongly attracted to the operatic art form, and noted in her diary that her aim was to have an opera performed in Germany before she turned forty. The seriousness with which the lessons were treated, and the indication of her long-term goals, illustrate that even at an early age Smyth did not allow herself to be limited by prescribed notions of a woman's proper role.

Smyth declared her intention to study in Leipzig, "even if I had to run away from home, and starve when I got there," approximately one year after she began studies with Ewing and as her parents began to make plans for her presentation. As resistance from the family, particularly from her father, was impossibly strong she set about making home life intolerable for her family by adopting deliberately antagonistic tactics to convince them of her determination. She refused to attend

28 Bernstein. "Shout, Shout, Up With your Song!": 305. In the Gloaming sold more than 140,000 copies between 1880-1889.
29 Smyth. Impressions I: 98.
30 Smyth. Impressions I: 120.
social engagements or church, refused to entertain guests and refused to speak to anyone. Such tactics perhaps reflected her youth (she was nineteen years old), but nonetheless they demonstrate her determination and the degree to which she was prepared to challenge traditional roles. She refused to cooperate in the society which she saw as so restrictive to her creative spirit. These tactics were not dissimilar to those adopted by the militant suffragists, a point which did not escape Smyth when writing of the matter in *Impressions that Remained*.32 She had, even as a nineteen year old, an awareness of her sense of personal difference and had already decided that the traditional role of marriage and motherhood was not suited to her. She was aware that she was not able to conform to the traditional roles for a woman of her social standing and she found the preparations for her presentation foreign to her ambitions.

Being a self-sufficing person, who didn’t want to cling or be clung to except in the way of dancing, what was I doing in this ante-chamber of matrimony, the ball-room? It was the old trouble cropping up again of knowing that between my world and me a gulf was fixed, that I was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, in fact a fraud.33

Her father’s reaction to her plan to study music in Leipzig was not surprising in the context of the time and their social class:

We knew no artists, and to him the word simply meant people who are out to break the ten commandments. It is no exaggeration to say that the life I proposed to lead seemed to him equivalent to going on the streets; hence the strange language he hurled at me ... 'I would sooner see you under the sod.'34

Her father’s views of the appropriate level of involvement for women and art simply reflected Victorian ideology. He did not object, for example, to her admiration of Bellini’s *Doge* at the National Gallery, which he viewed as a “blameless form of art devotion,” and allowed her to have a print of it, but he objected to her more serious interest in music.35 Her father’s views on studying music abroad were mitigated by more than her gender. In spite of his admiration of his wife’s artistic abilities in general he disliked the “artistic temperament.” He objected not only to Smyth’s desire to study music seriously, but even to her younger brother Robert “indulging” in painting as a young child.36

33 Smyth. *Impressions I*: 126.
35 Smyth. *Impressions I*: 128. Smyth believed her father paid for the framing of the print to “rub in that there are blameless forms of art-devotion.”
Victorian ideology and views on women naturally shaped Smyth’s upbringing and early music education. Her family’s beliefs and attitudes to women reflected the attitudes prevalent in society at the time and determined the nature of Smyth’s education and music training. She was given an education suitable for a young lady of her social status, and only met with opposition when she challenged her family’s beliefs by attempting to move beyond notions of a woman’s proper role. Smyth became aware that her ambitions conflicted with the ideological position of women and was aware of her deviation from many others around her.

Why Smyth chose to study at the Leipzig Conservatory was undoubtedly due to the influence of her governess who had studied there. This was later reinforced by Ewing’s endorsement of the institution. The Leipzig Conservatory was considered the best European music school and studying in Europe was essential for serious musicians.37 Ninety percent of professional musicians working in England up to the 1870s had received their training overseas.38 Overseas institutions like the Leipzig Conservatory encouraged foreign students to attend and the staff were themselves successful and active musicians.39 Thus, it was not without precedent for Smyth to choose to study in Leipzig, nor was she the first British woman to study abroad, although it was still unusual for the Victorian period.40

Smyth was also influenced by a number of musicians whom she met in London who had studied in Leipzig. After a performance in 1877 of Brahms’ Liebeslieder Walzer she met three singers, Louise Redeker (1853-?), William Shakespeare (1849-?) and George Henschel (1850-1934) all of whom had studied in Leipzig and who knew Brahms personally. Shakespeare had studied composition in Leipzig with Reinecke and also at the Royal Academy of Music with Sterndale Bennett. This was the first concert in which Smyth had heard the music of Brahms and it appears from her memoirs that it had an enormous impact and had reinforced her decision to study in Leipzig.41

The option of studying in England she apparently had not considered. An English alternative to Leipzig, the Royal Academy of Music in London, did not have the same reputation as the Leipzig Conservatory and did not offer tuition to

37 Bernstein. “Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!": 308.
38 Cyril Ehrlich. The Music Profession in Britain Since the Eighteenth Century: A Social History. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. 99. Trinity College opened in 1872, and accepted women students from 1877, but it did not have the reputation or purpose of Leipzig and was primarily for teacher training.
39 Ehrlich. The Music Profession in Britain: 84.
40 Bernstein. “Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!": 308. Bernstein lists Mary Wurm, Dora Schirmacher, Amina Goodwin and Florence May as other British women who also studied in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century.
41 Smyth. Impressions I: 130-1.
the same standard. The Royal Academy was founded in 1822, with the intention of providing music education to both female and male students. It accepted an equal number of boys and girls in its first year and became a “haven” for women musicians wishing to study who could not afford, or were not permitted, to study abroad. However, the Academy initially had some difficulty in attracting high-quality teaching staff, thus English students received an inferior education in comparison with Europe.

When Smyth arrived at the Leipzig Conservatory in 1877, she found that she was not the only woman studying there. However, the other students' attitudes and their “lack of musical enthusiasm” puzzled her. This was explained, as she discovered, by the fact that they were there merely to qualify for their teacher's certificates. Many of the women students from the middle- and upper-classes attending conservatoires in Europe never turned professional, giving up music when they married. Attending a conservatory and spending time in Europe may have increased a woman's marriage prospects. It is apparent, even at this early stage however, that Smyth was intent on a professional training and a career. She was aware of her slightly unusual position compared with the other women there, only three of whom were studying composition. Initially Smyth's composition lessons were with Salomon Jadassohn, but she was soon promoted to lessons with Carl Reinecke. According to Smyth she was the only female ever to be promoted, but Helen Hopekirk was also studying at Leipzig during 1876-1878 and had both Jadassohn and Reinecke for composition. Smyth made no mention of any particular students, and appeared disillusioned with the conservatory shortly after she arrived. She commented that, “that institution was merely trading on its Mendelssohnian reputation, though of course we in England did not know that.”

Conservatoires in Europe admitted female students, subject to special conditions. Girls and boys were in separate classes, and the assumption was that girls were merely training to be teachers and performers rather than composers and conductors. Their practical studies were limited to voice, piano and harp. In most conservatoires women would have studied harmony, theory and composition but it

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44 Salomon Jadassohn (1831-1902) was appointed as teacher of harmony, counterpoint, composition and piano at the Leipzig Conservatorium in 1871.
47 Smyth. Impressions I: 172.
is doubtful that the curriculum was the same for girls and boys.\textsuperscript{48} The number of female students at the Leipzig Conservatory had grown steadily since it opened in 1843. By 1868, of the 1,420 students to have graduated, 445 were women (thirty one percent). When the Conservatory opened, the entrance requirements for males and females were the same but female students took a two-year course, "specially organised for their requirements" while boys took a three-year course in theory.\textsuperscript{49} Smyth does not indicate whether there were any restrictions on the subjects which she could study. Clara Barnett Rogers had already raised the issue of composition classes for women at Leipzig when she studied there in the late 1850s.\textsuperscript{50} However, Smyth was rather dismissive of her conservatory training and the teachers there. Shortly after arriving in Leipzig she met Austrian composer Heinrich von Herzogenberg who offered to teach her privately, which she accepted, leaving the Conservatory before the end of her first year of study.\textsuperscript{51}

Smyth was a very close friend of Elisabeth (Lisl) von Herzogenberg. Lisl was a musician and one of the few women whom Brahms admired. She introduced Smyth to, and ensured she was accepted by, her musical circle which included Brahms and Clara Schumann. While in Leipzig Smyth also met Grieg and Tchaikovsky. She thrived on the attention she received through her rarity in their musical circle as a foreign female student composer and cultivated the eccentric English stereotype which became applied to her. Tchaikovsky wrote in his memoirs: "because no Englishwoman is capable of not possessing peculiarities and eccentricities, Miss Smyth has them – to wit: first, a superb dog ... second, a passion for hunting."\textsuperscript{52}

While in Leipzig her awareness of the difficulties facing professional women composers was growing. She became aware of the special issues facing them such as marriage, restrictions in the profession and the prejudice which they might face. Her own conventional views on women’s role and marriage confirmed her decision early on, not to marry. In a letter to her mother in 1877 she wrote, "every day I become more and more convinced of the truth of my old axiom, that why no women have become composers is because they have married, and then, very properly, made their husbands and children their first consideration."\textsuperscript{53} In October

\textsuperscript{49} Reich. "Women as Musicians." 135-7.
\textsuperscript{50} Reich. "Women as Musicians." 136.
\textsuperscript{51} Heinrich von Herzogenberg (1843-1900) settled in Leipzig in 1872 and in 1874 formed the Bach Society with Philipp Spitta. In 1868 he had married Elisabeth von Stockhausen (1847-1892) who was a talented musician. The couple were close friends of Brahms.
\textsuperscript{53} Smyth. Impressions I: 226. Letter to her mother in August 1877.
1877 she wrote to her sister of the “necessity of temporary spinsterhood ... to
certain kinds of lives” when telling her how busy she was with her studies.\textsuperscript{54} She
was aware, no doubt, of the necessity to work full-time on composition, and to
have the time and space to work uninterrupted. This view has been identified by
modern feminist historians as one of the factors contributing to women’s chequered
history in the arts.\textsuperscript{55} Smyth held the view that marriage was antithetical to
professional life for much of her life, and this was one of the reasons she chose not
to marry.\textsuperscript{56}

Even while a student Smyth had to confront issues of professionalism and the
implications for women composers. In April 1878 she approached Breitkopf and
Härtel to publish some of her songs. The editor she dealt with, Dr Hase, apparently
told her:

that songs had as a rule a bad sale – but that no composeress had ever
succeeded, barring Frau Schumann and Fräulein Mendelssohn, whose
songs had been published together with those of her husband or brother
respectively. He told me that a certain Frau Lang had written some really
very good songs, but they had no sale.\textsuperscript{57}

He agreed to print the songs, but Smyth felt too intimidated by his remarks on
women composers to ask for a fee. She wrote to her mother, needing to borrow
money to pay a dressmaker’s account, apologising and writing, “please consider it
the price of my modesty!”\textsuperscript{58} Marcia Citron’s research suggests that this ingrained
sense of inferiority related to publication was common among women composers.\textsuperscript{59}
Issues of professionalism were also linked to the Victorian views on working
women, class and morality, and the implications of accepting a fee for work.
Philanthropic work was acceptable for upper-class women, but to accept a fee had
implications of the working-class and prostitution, and threatened the structure of
private and public spheres. Sophia Jex-Blake (1840-1912), for example, refused a

\textsuperscript{54} Smyth. Impressions I: 232. Letter to Nina Smyth in October 1877.
\textsuperscript{55} The notion that women have been restricted by their domestic obligations and lack of personal
time and space is acknowledged in early feminist writings. Florence Nightingale, in her essay
Cassandra (1860), and Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own (1929) both note that women’s
creative abilities have been limited by this.
\textsuperscript{56} Many other women composers faced the same dilemma and found their own solutions, some
putting their careers on hold while they had children, or resuming their careers only after their
husband’s death. See Marcia Citron. Gender and the Musical Canon. Cambridge: Cambridge
\textsuperscript{57} Smyth. Impressions I: 248. Josephine Lang (1815-1880) was prolific composer of Lieder. Her
earliest compositions date from 1828. She had several collections of songs published in the
1840s. In 1882, two years after her death, Breitkopf and Härtel issued a retrospective collection
of 40 Lieder.
\textsuperscript{58} Smyth. Impressions I: 248. Letter to her mother April 1878.
\textsuperscript{59} Citron. Gender and the Musical Canon: 58.
salary while working as a mathematics lecturer at Queen's College because her father considered payment improper,\(^{60}\) and Clara Schumann and Fanny Hensel both had works published under the names of their male counterparts in part to avoid any perceived impropriety.\(^{61}\)

Smyth’s awareness of prejudice against women composers is evident in her impressions of meeting Brahms in 1879. She claims she was never attracted to, or impressed by his personality, largely because of his low opinion of women, and she quickly learnt that he would never take her seriously as a composer, because she was a woman.\(^{62}\) Writing in *Impressions that Remained*, Smyth states that she could never really understand why “the faithful had such an exalted opinion of his intellect.”\(^{63}\) In 1879 she wrote a poem, the last verse (in Smyth’s own translation from the German) reading:

As the great Brahms recently proclaimed,
'A clever woman is a thing of naught!'
So let us diligently cultivate stupidity,
That being the only quality demanded
Of being a female Brahms admirer!\(^{64}\)

She was angered by Brahms’ views which she acknowledged were the views prevalent in Germany at the time. She objected to the attitude “mein Mann sagt” held by many women, and Brahms’ use of the derogatory word for women, “Weibsbilder,” meaning hussy, wench. She later wrote: “In those days I knew and cared nothing about feminism, but it seemed to me natural to range oneself on the side of the under-dog, the woman.”\(^{65}\) In *Impressions that Remained* she remarked on Brahms’ attitude to women and the behaviour which she disliked:

If they did not appeal to him he was incredibly awkward and ungracious; if they were pretty he had an unpleasant way of leaning back in his chair, pouting out his lips, stroking his moustache, and staring at them as a greedy boy stares at jam-tarts. People used to think this rather delightful ... but it angered me, as did also his jokes about women, and his everlasting gibes at any ... who possessed brains or indeed ideas of any kind.... I used to complain fiercely ... about this.\(^{66}\)

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60 Murray. *Strong-Minded Women*: 266.
61 Bernstein. “Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!”: 322 n. 28.
62 Smyth. *Impressions I*: 275-280. This contrasts with his high regard of Clara Schumann and Elisabeth von Herzogenberg.
64 Smyth. *Impressions I*: 282. According to Smyth, Brahms insisted on reading the poem to everyone after Smyth presented it to him.
While studying in Leipzig, Smyth became aware of some of the difficulties professional women musicians faced. She was initially frustrated by the quality of teaching and the lack of seriousness amongst the other students at the conservatory, but found a supportive and stimulating environment in the Herzogenberg’s musical circle. Her realisation of the commitment composition required led her to state that she would not marry, and also confirmed her understanding of the expected moral position of women. Her views on the position of women in society and the realisation of women’s inferior status in the professional world were confirmed by both her experiences with Brahms and her attempts to gain publication of her work.

Smyth returned to England in 1890 to establish her professional career. The climate for women in England had changed somewhat during the time she had been abroad, and the status for women in general continued to improve. Attitudes to women were changing, albeit slowly, and the “new woman” debate centred around those changing attitudes and the position of women. This was due to expanding work opportunities, the increasing number of women in universities and the expansion of women’s public roles in local government. Both the increase in the number of women attending music colleges, and the prevalence of women’s orchestras in the 1880s and 1890s, indicate the greater involvement of women instrumentalists in the public arena. Their presence challenged prejudice against women performers as they began to compete for jobs. Attitudes were gradually changing, due in part to famous and admired performers such as Wilma Neruda (Lady Hallé). There was much public debate as to whether women should be allowed to perform, or were capable of performing, at a professional level. There were a number of women composers working in England at this time, including Dora Bright (1863-1951) who had studied at the Royal Academy of Music and had major works performed at the Crystal Palace and Philharmonic concerts in 1892. A Cantata by Ethel Boyce (1863-1936), then a student at the Royal Academy of Music, was presented at a Royal Academy of Music orchestral concert in 1890 and described as remarkable “for a lady student” and “showing great promise.” In 1895 the *Strand Musical Magazine* published two studies of “Popular Lady Composers” which briefly profiled the life and works of seven composers of songs and piano pieces. Thus, women were known as composers of small and large scale works, although as composers of large scale works they were still a rarity. In 1900 a paper titled “Woman as a Musician” was read to the annual conference of the

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69 The *Musical Times*. May 1890: 281.
Incorporated Society of Musicians, and included the following conclusion. "We are
told that there are women novelists, women artists, and so on.... Why not women
composers? I say emphatically that there are women composers; they do actually
exist."\textsuperscript{70}

Smyth had two works performed in London in 1890: the \textit{Serenade in D} in April
at a Crystal Palace concert, and in December, the \textit{Overture to Antony and Cleopatra}.
Smyth used her initials rather than her full name for the performances of these
works, thus concealing her gender. George Bernard Shaw remarked: "When E. M.
Smyth's heroically brassy \textit{Overture to Antony and Cleopatra} was finished, and the
composer called to the platform, it was observed with stupefaction that all that
tremendous noise had been made by a lady."\textsuperscript{71} The performances of these works
introduced her to English audiences, and she believed that their success would
enable her to gain performances of subsequent works. During the period 1890 to
1911 Smyth completed a Mass, three operas (\textit{Fantasia}, \textit{Der Wald} and \textit{The Wreckers}),
and a number of smaller works. She experienced difficulties in obtaining
performances of her works, and increasingly attributed it to the difficulties of being
a woman composer.

The difficulties she experienced gaining a performance of the Mass
demonstrate how she arrived at her beliefs of the prejudice that existed. She took
the Mass to conductors in Germany and England, trying to secure a performance.
While many conductors expressed interest and admired her work, she was unable
to get a performance commitment from any of them. However, she succeeded in
gaining the interest of Joseph Barnby, conductor of the Royal Choral Society who
initially hesitated to programme the work because of the difficulties, as he
explained them, of promoting the works of unknown composers. Smyth eventually
succeeded in gaining a performance with: the aid of aristocratic and influential
friends, but the event left her feeling very bitter about the lengths she had to go to
gain the performance. In \textit{As Time Went On}, she wrote: "I am quite certain that in
1893 it will have displeased the Faculty – subconsciously of course – that what is
called masculine, i.e. strong music, should have been written by a woman."\textsuperscript{72} Press
reviews of the time indicate she was correct in assuming that her music and gender
caued some comment. Reviewers remarked that it was encouraging to see "a lady

\textsuperscript{70} Cited in Percy A. Scholes. \textit{The Mirror of Music, 1844-1944: A Century of Musical Life in Britain as
reflected in the pages of the Musical Times}. London: Novello and Oxford University Press: 1947: 734. The speaker, Dr H. A. Harding stated that there were 489 women composers at that time, although it is not known how he arrived at that figure.


\textsuperscript{72} Smyth. \textit{As Time Went On}: 175.
composer attempting to soar into the loftier regions of musical art,” and the work was deemed remarkable considering that it came “from a lady’s pen.”73

She struggled to gain performances of her three operas, Fantasio, Der Wald and The Wreckers. She took all three around opera houses in Germany, there being no permanent full-time opera house in England,74 and while she gained interest from many of the conductors she showed the operas to, she had great difficulty in obtaining performances. Fantasio was eventually performed in 1898 (just after her fortieth birthday, nearly satisfying her childhood aim). Der Wald premiered in Berlin, London and New York between 1902 and 1903, and The Wreckers, having initially been written in French, was first performed in Leipzig in 1906. When she came to seek a second production of The Wreckers in Prague, she had experienced enough prejudice and difficulties in Germany to feel that her only chance for the opera was “to find a man who should care enough about it, and be big enough, to stand up against the really terrific onslaught the Press felt itself bound to make on the work of a female Anglo-Saxon.”75 She recognised that the difficulties she experienced in gaining performances were not only because of her sex. In 1899 she commented to Henry Brewster about the effect on her work of “my fight against the awful difficulty of sex and nationality.”76

The issue of her nationality makes it more difficult to accurately assess the extent to which her problems in obtaining performances can be attributed to her gender. During the time she was fighting for performances of Fantasio and Der Wald, anti-English sentiment in Germany, because of the Boer War (1899-1902), made the situation even more difficult. The first performance of Der Wald in Berlin in April 1902 was greeted with organised booing and hissing, which was attributed to Smyth’s nationality.77 Der Wald was later presented at Covent Garden in July 1902 with success and as a result was taken up by Maurice Grau, the manager of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, for production in 1903. Although Smyth was initially against taking the opera to America, she eventually agreed in the hope that it would encourage further performances of the work in England. Der Wald was the first opera by a woman composer to be presented at the Metropolitan Opera and it was well received. A review of the production remarked on the “masculine” qualities of her music. Smyth dismissed the reviews as “half good, half

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74 Covent Garden operated only for short season in the summer and was devoted to mainstream operatic works. The Carl Rosa Opera Company was a touring company with no permanent home, making productions of new works difficult. Smyth gave her reasons for concentrating on Europe for performances as the lack of the operatic “Machine” in England.
bad, but very idiotic either way.”78 Smyth was by now of the opinion that reviews that judged her work in terms of her gender merely served to undermine her music.

She was aware that she was quite unusual as a woman composer working in large-scale genres. In 1900 she visited Augusta Holmès, whom she considered to be “the nearest approach to a large-scale woman composer that the world had yet seen,” but was left disappointed at what she perceived to be Holmès lack of commitment to serious composition and did not consider her a colleague.79 In a letter to Henry Brewster in 1902 Smyth wrote:

I feel I must fight for Der Wald, also because I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put out to sea. Now I am neither afraid nor a pauper, and in my way I am an explorer who believes supremely in the advantages of this bit of pioneering.80

Smyth was aware of the role of gender in professional composition, the inequality of her position, and the effect this had on her work. In 1894, in a letter to Lady Ponsonby, she quoted a comment made by her friend Julius Röntgen that, “to live on music you must be in it.” Smyth’s response to this was: “This made me very thoughtful. If I were a man maybe, I should not live outside the world of music, but I’m not a man.”81

Although she was aware of gender inequalities and the position of women, she did not immediately equate them with the suffrage movement. Ironically, Smyth’s first contact with suffragists made no immediate impact on her political views. She had met Rhoda and Agnes Garrett in autumn 1880 while on holiday in England and spent much of the following summer with them. Rhoda and Agnes (cousin and sister of Millicent Fawcett) ran their own interior decorating business and were close supporters of Fawcett and her work. Smyth claims that she was “indifferent” to the subject of suffrage, which was a much talked about subject in their house: “Of course both cousins and all their friends were ardent Suffragists, and I wonder now at the patience with which they supported my total indifference on the subject.”82 Unfortunately no letters survive between Rhoda Garrett and Smyth so it is not possible to ascertain whether they ever discussed political and suffrage issues. However, when Smyth was in contact with the Garretts in 1880 and 1881, she was still a student and had not encountered very much professional

prejudice against her work. She did not see a relationship between her situation and the wider implications of the suffrage issue. Smyth's biographer Christopher St John suggested that “many women at that time who, like Ethel, had made their way through their individual efforts and had not been hindered by male prejudice, were apt to think the Suffrage movement was not really necessary.”

Many of Smyth's friends held feminist views. Smyth became a good friend of Empress Eugénie in 1894 and described her as an “ardent suffragist” who had “always been interested in the efforts of women to overcome sex-prejudice.” Empress Eugénie had been involved with women's causes in France in the 1850s and 1860s and had worked to apply pressure for the granting of Baccalaureat for the first woman in France in 1861. Until Empress Eugénie's intervention Julie Daubié was not going to be granted the degree even though she had passed the exam. Empress Eugénie's influence also enabled a few women to study at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris in 1850s and 1860s. She conferred the Cross of the French Legion of Honour on Rosa Bonheur in 1865 to show that “genius has no sex." She helped Smyth throughout her career; she was instrumental in gaining the first performance of Smyth's Mass and paid for the printing of the scores. "Her kindness to me was undoubtedly in part a result of sympathy with women who are up against the barrier of prejudice.”

Another “ardent suffragist” who supported Smyth in her career was American Mary Dodge whom she met through her sister Violet. Dodge helped finance performances of Smyth's works including the 1909 performance of *The Wreckers* and from that time also supplied her with an annual allowance and the money to build her house in Woking. The generosity of her friends enabled Smyth a freedom to compose without the financial constraints that may have hampered her otherwise.

In June 1910 Smyth was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Music from Durham and as a result she received a letter from Lady Constance Lytton asking for her views on suffrage and militancy and inviting her to join the Women's Social and Political Union. Smyth was initially not interested, confessing to "indifference tinged with distaste, and Heaven forgive me, ridicule," but was persuaded by her friend the Austrian writer Herman Bahr who had recently been in England and had

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followed the suffrage debates. He had been impressed with Emmeline Pankhurst and the political arguments of the women. His account of the arguments and his description of Pankhurst intrigued Smyth. Consequently she arranged to attend a meeting in London to hear Pankhurst speak and was immediately impressed by, and attracted to, her and wrote to her on September 15 1910:

Owing to a very busy and very fighting sort of life I have never paid much attention to the Suffrage question.... [however after hearing the debate] no one can be a more profoundly convinced Suffragist than I. I have always felt enormous admiration for the militants – absolutely approved of their policy, and seen in it (as must, I think anyone who has read history) a supreme guarantee that the question is a real one, not a fad of visionaries but a practical need voicing itself in many ways, among others in this way.\(^90\)

A decision to join the suffrage movement had not come easily. She was extremely reluctant to cause such a disruption to her composition at a time when she perhaps felt she was starting to gain more performances and make a mark on the English scene. Smyth claims that she in fact left England in 1908 to “find a refuge from the turmoil of the fight for Votes for Women.... As a composer I wanted to keep out of it. It seemed incompatible with artistic creation.”\(^91\)

When in 1903 Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst founded the Women’s Social and Political Union they believed that the existing political parties were not fully supportive of the women’s suffrage cause. From the outset the Pankhursts adopted militant tactics (their motto was “Deeds, not Words”), causing disruptions at political meetings and forcing the issue into the public arena. The WSPU worked principally for the enactment of a Bill to remove the political disability of sex. They called for the vote for women “on the same terms as it is or may be granted for men.”\(^92\) They argued that taxation and representation should go together and that the vote was vital to ensure women had a say in policies that influenced their lives.

Smyth agreed to join the WSPU in September 1910 and from late 1910 until mid 1913 she worked closely with Emmeline Pankhurst.\(^93\) She accompanied her to

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91 A note for A Fresh Start, the volume of autobiography Smyth began writing shortly before her death, cited in St John. Ethel Smyth: 144.
93 It is not clear from Smyth’s writings when she actually was a member of the WSPU. Writing in What Happened Next she was unsure when she actually joined (“1910, or was it 1911?” What Happened Next: 210) and she often cites her two years as 1911-13. She did leave the movement in 1913, travelling to Wales and Ireland in the summer and Egypt by November 1913. However, it appears that she agreed to join in September 1913, and had an article, “Better Late than Never” published in the suffrage paper Votes for Women on November 18 1910. Elizabeth Wood cites
meetings and was continually impressed with her abilities to gain the support of her audience: “I never heard her make a mediocre speech, let alone one that failed to hit the centre of the target, and the whole was bathed in that indescribable, uncatchable element, the genius of an orator.” Pankhurst stayed with Smyth in Woking when she needed a break from activities in London, and later, to recuperate from hunger-strikes. Pankhurst was one of the main reasons why Smyth had joined the movement, and she was strongly influenced by her views.

Smyth’s work for the WSPU included canvassing support among other women. On one occasion in early 1912 she called on the wife of a Cabinet Minister, who was known to be anti-suffrage. The woman knew of Smyth’s music career, and questioned her on how she was able to give up her music for the cause:

This was just the opening I wanted. I asked her to judge by that what the cause meant to us, and pointed out that owing to the circumstances of my career as woman composer I knew more than most people about the dire workings of prejudice.95

Explaining that it was because of her music and the prejudice she faced in her career that she became involved in the politics, the woman remarked “You mean because of the advertisement?” clearly misunderstanding her motives.96

Letter writing campaigns became a new and frequent activity. Smyth wrote letters to The Times on suffrage issues, including women’s suffrage bills, and in support of the militant action. She wrote in 1912: “Women are determined to have the vote now, and refuse to wait till the cruel burden borne by the mothers of the race has further sapped their vitality.... Women are up in revolt against a moral outrage.”97

The first wave of the organised window-breaking campaign in March 1912 in Downing Street was led by Pankhurst. Smyth took a part in this campaign. On March 4th, after speaking at a meeting at the London Pavilion to about 150 suffragettes, appealing to those who had previously “shrunk from the sacrifice involved in militant action,” Smyth went to Berkeley Square and broke a window at the house of the Cabinet Minister Louis Harcourt who, she remarked, made:

quite the most objectionable remark about women’s suffrage that has ever been made, and that was when he said, in answer to a deputation of

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95 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 204.
96 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 204-5.
98 The Times (London) March 5 1912: 6.
women, that he would be very happy to give the vote to women if all
women were as intelligent and well-balanced as his own wife.\textsuperscript{99}

Smyth was sentenced to two months hard labour in the second division for the
window-breaking incident but she only served approximately half of her sentence.
Writing in 1933 of her time in Holloway, it appears that she enjoyed the
camaraderie of the women even though she once remarked that she was “deficient
in the group sense.”\textsuperscript{100} In contrast to her perceived solitary battle for acceptance in
the music profession she found the environment in prison supportive and non-
competitive.

I have often reflected that during those two months in Holloway for the
first and last time of my life I was in good society. Think of it! more than
a hundred women parked together, old and young, rich and poor, strong
and delicate, one and all divorced from any thought of self, careless as to
consequences, forgetful of everything save the idea for which they had
faced imprisonment.\textsuperscript{101}

During this time she developed a sense of a women’s culture which became
increasingly important in the development of her feminist views, particularly in
regard to the creative processes of women. Smyth’s time in Holloway Prison was
possibly a turning point in this development. She wrote: “[It is] no wonder if some
of us look back on that time with thankfulness and with awe, for where else on
earth could we have scraped acquaintance with the Spirit that in those days had
pitched her tent in Holloway Prison.”\textsuperscript{102} Smyth had, in many senses, been an
outsider all her life but at that time she belonged to an identifiable group.\textsuperscript{103}

Smyth did not, as she professed, completely abandon composition when she
joined the WSPU. Instead, she turned to writing songs for the cause. Music was a
prominent part of the suffragettes’ activity, which included singing during rallies,
and processions with brass and pipe marching bands. Many of their songs were
adaptations of well-known songs (“Sing a Song of Sixpence,” “John Brown’s Body”
and “Auld Lang Syne”) with new satirical and witty words. However, Smyth

\textsuperscript{100} Cited in St John. \textit{Ethel Smyth}: 144.
\textsuperscript{101} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 211. This is of course a rather idealised image, written some
twenty years after the event. At the time she had written a lengthy letter to The Times
complaining of the poor sanitary conditions experienced by Pankhurst and others. “Mrs
Pankhurst’s Treatment in Prison: Statement of Dr. Ethel Smyth.” \textit{The Times} (London) April 19
\textsuperscript{102} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 211.
\textsuperscript{103} This sense of camaraderie, and “being in good company” was felt by many suffragettes.
Margaret Haig (Lady Rhondda, founder of \textit{Time and Time}) wrote of her time in the WSPU in
\textit{This was my World}, and wrote of being “thrilled” and “exhilarated” by the movement, which,
she admitted, gave her purpose in life.
composed a new song, *The March of the Women*, to which Cecily Hamilton fitted words and the piece was formally presented to Pankhurst on 21 January 1911. The song was then publicly launched and became available for sale. On 23 March 1911 at Royal Albert Hall, Pankhurst presented Smyth with a baton in recognition of services to the movement. *The March of the Women* was sung for the first time in a public parade on 17 June 1911, in a parade of 40,000 suffragists, and became popular with the women at meeting and marches. It became the third song in a set of three titled *Songs of Sunrise*. The second song, *1910*, commemorates the events of Black Friday (November 18 1910). It combines fragments of anti-suffrage speeches and political slogans in a witty manner. Reviews of *1910* noted that suffragettes heard the work with “tears of laughter and ‘rapturously encored’ it as ‘the militant spirit at its best: determined, but too genial to be malicious.’”

On 1st April 1911 Smyth presented a concert of her works at Queens Hall, with the London Symphony Orchestra, in aid of funds for WSPU. Smyth conducted the programme which included the Overture and Prelude to Act II of *The Wreckers*, the Benedictus from the Mass, the choral prelude from *Der Wald, Hey Nonny No* and the *Songs of Sunrise*. The concert was repeated in June. Reviews of both concerts noted the mixture of suffragists and music lovers in the audience and the enthusiastic response of the suffragists to *The March of the Women*.

St John wrote of the impact which Smyth’s time in the suffrage movement had had on her.

> Always prone during her musical career to suspect men of antagonism to any attempt by women to break down monopolies that men had enjoyed for centuries, she became convinced by their treatment of the Suffragists that her suspicions were entirely justified.

Smyth’s views became more radical in the period 1910-13. The suffrage movement had served to illustrate that the prejudices she faced were not experienced by her alone. Although she remained convinced of the incompatibility of art and politics, it became apparent at this time that the advancement of women in political and social life was necessary before they would be treated equally in artistic life. Prior to her experience in the suffrage movement Smyth’s beliefs concerning the position of women in society were almost solely based on personal experience. She recognised that she had faced discrimination in her career, partly because she was a woman and partly because of her nationality and country of study: in Germany she

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104 Wood. “Performing Rights”: 622.
was a foreigner, in England she had a foreign education. In many respects she was fortunate throughout her career. She had many influential friends and contacts with royalty, and was not obliged to rely entirely on her work for income. However, until she joined the suffrage movement she had paid little attention to the political position of women. She had been concerned with accepted roles for women and how they were viewed by society. She was also concerned about the prejudice she faced as a woman composer and had seen it as her duty to encourage women (by example) to break down stereotypes and limitations. However, the awareness of the implications of women’s political position afforded to her by the suffrage movement caused her to consider: how this also affected the position of women in music history. The suffrage movement gave her a framework to explain her position and demonstrated the effects of the unequal treatment of women, which she applied to the position of women in music.

Smyth was profoundly affected by the dramatic change in the British social climate as a result of World War I. The WSPU disbanded at the outbreak of war in 1914 and many suffragists immediately offered their services to Local Relief Committees, the War Office, and the Red Cross. As the British Government initially refused the services of women in hospitals many women worked for the allied forces instead. After passing radiography examinations in Paris in 1916 Smyth worked as a supplementary radiologist at a French Military hospital at Vichy, attached to the XIIIth Division of the French Army.

Due to the increasing shortage of working men in England by 1915 women took on jobs that had previously been closed to them. This broke down some barriers, changed attitudes, customs and social conditions throughout the war. However, it did create difficulties. Male workers felt threatened by women taking over their jobs, and issues of training, unionism and pay rates increased the hostility. “It outraged their sense of what was right and, even more strongly, it filled them with fear for the future.” The Government had to intervene and in March 1915 agreements were made between industry and government to restore pre-war practices once the war was over. However, women were proving their ability to work as equals with men and were employed in industries, munitions

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108 Anderson and Zinsser. *A History of their Own:* 198-9
109 Smyth. *Female Pipings in Eden:* 239. In this account she states she joined her sister, Nina Hollings at the Italian front, in 1915. The exact chronology of Smyth’s involvement in the war and her work in France, and also in Italy with her sister Nina Hollings who operated a mobile ambulance unit, differs slightly in the various accounts she gives of this period. It appears that she was in England in 1915 and early 1916, when The Boatswain’s Mate was performed, and did not in fact arrive in Italy until October 1916, where she assisted Nina and Helena Gleichen. For an account of Nina Holling’s and Helena Gleichen’s war work, see Helena Gleichen. *Contacts and Contrasts.* London: John Murray, 1940.
factories, banks, and the service trades. By 1916, attitudes towards women workers were changing, and they were being openly praised:

The newspapers, a little surprised, but very eloquent, took up all such remarks with enthusiasm and began to say that ‘the nation is grateful to the women’ – not realising even yet that the women WERE the nation just as much as the men were.111

The fight for the vote for women was won towards the end of the war, after considerable debate. In January 1917 changes were recommended which provided a limited franchise to women, giving the vote to women householders and wives of householders, and setting a minimum age limit of 30. The resulting bill was passed in January 1918.

Smyth was still in France, and did not arrive back in England until March or April 1918. She remarked in Female Pipings in Eden that when “the vote was at last given to women ... we all took it very quietly, being under the shadow of war.”112 This reaction was shared by Cecily Hamilton (the author of the words to The March of the Women), who was also working in France at the time. She remarked that she was more immediately concerned with enemy gunfire and “at that moment I didn’t give a button for my vote; and, rightly or wrongly, I have always imagined that the Government gave it me in much the same mood as I received it.”113

The nature of feminist debate altered in the post-war climate with the focus shifting from the fight for the vote and representation, to issues of improved conditions for women in health and education and breaking down barriers to women’s participation in public life. The question of women’s employment post-war was one of the issues tackled by most feminists in the 1920s as the effects of the demobilisation of women workers in 1919 became apparent. The domestic and economic situation had changed considerably from the pre-war position and immediately after the war nearly one woman in three had to be self-supporting.114

The tone of the Press swung, all in a moment, from extravagant praise [of women workers] to the opposite extreme, and the very same people who had been heroines and the saviours of their country a few months before were now parasites, blacklegs, and limpets. Employers were implored to turn them out as passionately as they had been implored to employ them.115

111 Strachey. The Cause: 344.
112 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 244
During this period there was a reassertion of traditional limits on women and strong pressure on women to return to the domestic sphere. Government propaganda contributed to the ideological backlash against the gains women had secured prior to and during the war. Theories on the proper roles for women were legitimised and given scientific justification by psychoanalytic theory, popularised by Freud in the 1920s.

During the 1920s Smyth was prominent both as a composer and as a campaigner for equality for women musicians. During her time with the WSPU she began a public campaign on the position of women in orchestras. Since their formation the major professional orchestras in England excluded women players. When challenged, various reasons were given for the exclusion, ranging from the inferiority of women players, to the unsuitability of women musicians travelling home alone after performances. A number of "Ladies' Orchestras" were formed in the 1880s and 1890s to accommodate the increasing numbers of violinists emerging from the training colleges in London, but these orchestras largely performed light music for soirées or in restaurants, and were often treated with derision by their male colleagues and the press. These apparent opportunities usually did not equip women musicians with the experience necessary for competing for places in the professional orchestras. Some women gained employment in the music hall orchestras, but the professional orchestras remained male-only. Smyth was concerned with the position of women orchestral players and the lack of professional opportunities for the graduates of the London training colleges, because she considered the financial and professional rewards offered by the orchestras to be essential to the advancement of women musicians in society. In 1913 she had written to *The Times* on the inclusion of women in the Queen's Hall Orchestra, at the instigation of Henry Wood. The Queen's Hall Orchestra employed women players to take the places vacated by men called up for military service, and many women were retained after the war. However, considerable prejudice against women players remained. Smyth was angered when, in 1920, the Hallé Orchestra sacked the women players, giving the reasons of "Unity of Style" and not being able to find suitable accommodation for women players when on tour. She became increasingly outspoken on the subject, which formed the basis for her early writings on women in music.

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The increase in patriotism and nationalistic fervour as a result of the war also improved the opportunities for British composers and performers in England. In 1917 the British Music Society was formed to organise concerts and promote the work of "native" composers and during the 1920s concerts of music by British composers became increasingly common. After the war Smyth resumed composition, with her career firmly based in England. Her fourth opera, *The Boatswain's Mate* (1914) had signalled a change in composition style to a light opera style which she believed was better suited to English audiences. Her two post-war works for the stage, *Fête Galante* (1922) and *Entente Cordiale* (1925), continued in this style.

The 1920s and 1930s were a productive time for Smyth, and her prominence in music in England increased. Her diary entries in the 1920s (cited in St John’s biography) demonstrate that she did gain performances of her works, many of which she conducted herself. These included performances at the Proms in 1921, the Salzburg International Festival of Chamber Music in 1922, and performances at festivals in Leeds, Hull and London. Many of her older works were revived during this period: the Mass (1893) in Birmingham in February 1924, the *Violin Sonata* (1887) by Fanny Davies in 1923. She knew many of the major musical figures of the period, many of whom wrote publicly expressing admiration for her music.

Smyth frequently conducted her own works with the British Women’s Symphony Orchestra. The BWSO was established in 1924, and gave its first public performance in April 1924 at Queen’s Hall, conducted by Gwynne Kimpton. The programme for the first concert stated that the orchestra had "been founded by various leading women musicians in England, with the idea that the time has come for professional women musicians in this country to be represented by their own complete Symphony Orchestra." Smyth enjoyed conducting. Having received no formal training she took advice from Henry Wood on matters of technique. Women conductors were still considered a novelty, although Smyth was not the only woman conducting at the time. She remarked in her diary in November 1924

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120 Elkin. *Queen's Hall*: 86-7.
123 Elkin. *Queen's Hall*: 48.
124 Elkin. *Queen's Hall*: 47. In 1934 the orchestra changed its focus to become primarily a training ground for women players to gain the experience necessary to gain work in the professional orchestras.
that she had heard Ethel Leginska, "a brilliant girl conductor ... who conducted the LSO in a taxing programme." \(^{126}\)

Smyth's involvement with women's music organisations extended to the Society of Women Musicians, founded by Marion M. Scott and Gertrude Eason in 1911. She became honorary vice president from 1925 until her death in 1944. However, she was possibly wary of becoming too involved with women's organisations since she was aware of the consequences of segregation and marginalisation. Many of the decisions she made throughout her career, and her writings on women and music, indicate her belief that acceptance into mainstream music was essential for women musicians.

She received public acknowledgment of her position as a composer in England in 1922 when she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and in June 1926 she was awarded the degree of Doctor of Music from Oxford. During this period her views on women in music were well known to her friends and her reading public, with essays published in *Streaks of Life* and *A Final Burning of Boats*, and many letters on the subject published in newspapers.

In the late 1920s and 1930s Smyth's career began to turn away from composition. She first began experiencing hearing difficulties in 1913 and consulted an aurist in Paris during the war, and it was at this time that a friend encouraged her to publish some of her childhood memories. Her first publication was the two volumes of autobiography, *Impressions that Remained* (1919), followed in 1921 by *Streaks of Life, A Three-Legged Tour of Greece* (1927) and in 1928 with *A Final Burning of Boats*. As her hearing difficulties increased she gradually turned away from composition and looked to writing as her creative outlet. By the mid 1930s she was suffering from distorted hearing (hearing a semi-tone apart in each ear), making even listening to music unpleasant. *The Prison* (1930), a symphony for soprano and bass solo with chorus and orchestra based on a piece of philosophical writing by Henry Brewster, was her last major composition. The frequency of memoir and essay publications increased after this with *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), *As Time Went On* and *Beecham and Pharaoh* (1935), *Inordinate (?) Affection* (1936), *Maurice Baring* (1938) and *What Happened Next* (1940). She had also began a new volume of autobiography, *A Fresh Start* (unfinished when she died in 1944). Public interest in her writings stimulated interest in her compositions, and she used this to push for further performances of her works. A letter to the *Musical Times* in 1922 indicates recognition of the interest she created by writing and her eagerness to use this to help get her works performed:

\(^{126}\) Diary entry 7 November 1924. Cited in St John. *Ethel Smyth*: 188.
Ever since my Memoirs were published I have been in the habit of receiving letters from all parts of the country, even America, expressing a wish that my readers could hear some of my music ... may I suggest to these kind sympathisers (especially to women concert-goers) that it would be a good plan to express their wishes to the conductors and committees of their local orchestras and choral societies? For in nine cases out of ten it is merely that one gets forgotten in the crowd of male composers.\textsuperscript{127}

In February 1930 Smyth met Virginia Woolf, after which their friendship played an important role in her writings on women and music. Their meeting was initiated by Smyth, who had recently read \textit{A Room of One's Own}, and found parallels between her own views on women in music and Woolf's essay.\textsuperscript{128} It is perhaps surprising that they had not met earlier. Woolf heard \textit{The Wreckers} in June 1909 and had seen Smyth at a concert on 29th November 1919.\textsuperscript{129} She reviewed \textit{Impressions that Remained} and \textit{Streaks of Life} for \textit{New Statesman} in April 1921\textsuperscript{130} and had used Smyth to counter a statement on the intellectual inferiority of women in debate with "Affable Hawk" (Desmond MacCarthy) in \textit{New Statesman} in October 1920.\textsuperscript{131} They had friends in common, including Vita Sackville-West, and had read each other's work. After reading \textit{Impressions that Remained} in November 1919, Woolf wrote in her diary, revealing her opinion of Smyth's work and her fascination with her life.

I'm reading Ethel Smyth. I wish it were better.... What a subject! That one should see it as a superb subject is a tribute to her, but of course, not knowing how to write, she's muffed it.... Honesty is her quality; & the fact that she made a great rush at life; friendships with women interest me.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{130} Nicolson, ed. \textit{The Letters of Virginia Woolf IV}: 137.
\textsuperscript{131} Desmond MacCarthy had reviewed Arnold Bennett's book \textit{Our Women} (1920), on the inferior intellectual powers of women, which, he claimed, no amount of education could improve. Woolf began a debate in the \textit{New Statesman} with MacCarthy: "There is nothing else [but intellectual inferiority] to prevent down the ages, so far as I can see, women who always played, sang and studied music, producing as many musicians from among their numbers as men have done,' says 'Affable Hawk'. Was there nothing to prevent Ethel Smyth from going to Munich? Was there no opposition from her father? Did she find that the playing, singing and study of music which well-to-do families provided for their daughters were such as to fit them to become musicians?" Cited in Anne Olivier Bell, ed. \textit{The Diary of Virginia Woolf, II}: 1920-1924. London: Hogarth Press, 1978. Appendix III "The Intellectual Status of Women." : 341.
Smyth was attracted by Woolf’s intellect and saw her as a colleague in the women’s cause. Woolf was Smyth’s first close friend to be openly outspoken on women’s issues since her friendship with Emmeline Pankhurst. Her other close friends, including writer and painter Edith Somerville, who had read A Room of One’s Own and “found it admirable,” were often supportive of women’s issues but not outspoken on the subject.\(^{133}\) Her friendship with Woolf was important in the development of her writings on women and music. During the period of their friendship, from 1930 until Woolf’s suicide in 1941, Smyth published her most succinct essay on women and music, Female Pipings in Eden, and wrote of her involvement in feminism in As Time Went On, and Beecham and Pharaoh.\(^{134}\) While all her volumes of autobiography had a feminist slant, Woolf’s influence refined and reinforced many of her views and her manner of expression. She consulted Woolf on all her books, in particular Female Pipings in Eden, sending her manuscripts to read and asking advice on matters of publishing. Woolf and Smyth shared the public speaking platform at the London branch of the National Society for Women’s Service on professions for women in 1931, and both Virginia and Leonard Woolf praised her speech, encouraging her to publish.\(^{135}\) It appears likely that her speech on that occasion became the basis of the essay on women and music “Female Pipings in Eden.” Woolf believed in the importance of Smyth’s essay and her arguments, in particular Smyth’s arguments on the impact of women’s lack of musical training.

Yes, I think it is well worth saying – well worth printing. I think much of it very convincing, interesting, forcible.... I mean the facts about education. I think they could not be better, more musically, more persuasively put. And no one I expect has any notion of them.\(^{136}\)

Smyth frequently complained in her books, in the press and to her friends about the lack of performances of her work, reviewers’ attitudes to her music, and her treatment as a woman composer in a male-dominated field in general. She also kept records of other instances of discrimination against women; according to Christopher St John she had many boxes of newspaper articles on the

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\(^{134}\) In this same period Woolf published The Waves (1931), The Common Reader: Second Series (1932), Flush (biography of Elizabeth Barret Browning’s dog, 1933), The Years (1937), Three Guineas (1938), and had nearly completed the final draft of Between the Acts (which was published shortly after her death).


discrimination of women in orchestras which Smyth offered to Woolf when she was working on *Three Guineas* (1938).137

Smyth’s feminist beliefs developed as a result of personal experiences. Throughout her career she struggled against prejudice and discrimination. The awareness she gained during her involvement with the suffrage movement, that the prejudices she faced were experienced by many other women also, led to the politicising of her views and ultimately to the publication of her three essays on women in music.

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CHAPTER TWO
THE IMAGE OF SMYTH IN HISTORY

The extent of Ethel Smyth’s personal battles and her achievements as a woman composer in a male-dominated profession have not always been acknowledged. Despite the strength of Smyth’s arguments and the fact that she was speaking on behalf of many women composers her essays on women in music have been overlooked. The representation of Smyth for much of the twentieth century has instead focused on her gender, personality, and character rather than on the insights from her feminist writing, or indeed, her music. Histories have been dominated by accounts of her eccentricity, her numerous friendships, her assumed lesbianism, her supposed lack of commitment to composition and her work as an author. Critics have attempted to refute her claim that women were discriminated against. Many claimed that she was wrong and insisted that she had a personal, biased perspective of her own position. Indeed some have used the record of Smyth’s achievements to prove that there cannot have been any discrimination against women.¹

As a woman composer who defied stereotyping, Smyth presented a difficulty to writers and critics attempting to assess her status and position in English music. Many reviews, biographical dictionaries and history books resorted to placing her in the separate category of “woman composer,” while at the same time admitting that she did not conform to that stereotype. In general, critics demonstrated a difficulty in writing about her career without discussing it in terms of her gender. In her research on twentieth century British composers Jill Halstead has found this to be common problem for women composers in general.²

Because all of Smyth’s major works gained performances and because she published volumes of writing and was involved in the suffrage movement she maintained a high public profile. There are many accounts of Smyth in music

journals, newspapers and in books on English musicians published during her lifetime. Her numerous friendships with public figures in music and literature meant that she also appeared in autobiographies, biographies, diary and letter collections of her friends and colleagues. After her death Smyth continued to be mentioned in histories of English music and opera, although her works were not often performed. The first full length study of Smyth, *Ethel Smyth: A Biography* by Christopher St John, was published in 1959. This included tributes to Smyth written by Edward and Vita Sackville-West and Kathleen Dale, who also contributed a short critical study of Smyth’s music. This biography has been the main reference for work on Smyth since its publication.

The image of Smyth that has been maintained in histories has been influenced by the large amount of personal writing by friends and colleagues, much of which focused on accounts of her personality and behaviour. She was mentioned in the autobiographies of Maurice Baring, Thomas Beecham, Elisabeth Lutyens, Osbert Sitwell, Bruno Walter, Henry Wood, in the diary and letters of Virginia Woolf, in the letters of Adrian Boult, and Frederick Delius, in the letters between Elisabeth von Herzogenberg and Brahms, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson. She was discussed in biographies of Tchaikovsky, Arthur Sullivan, Vernon Lee, Edith Somerville, Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf and Emmeline Pankhurst as well as in histories of the suffrage movement. She has been caricatured in fiction by E. F. Benson in *Dodo*, as the eccentric composer Edith Staines, and by Virginia Woolf as Miss La Trobe, the eccentric director in *Between the Acts*.

Many prominent musicians considered Smyth a friend and colleague. However, accounts in their autobiographies, some published during Smyth’s lifetime, gently poke fun at her physical appearance and behaviour. Henry Wood, in his autobiography *My Life of Music*, recalled his first meeting with Smyth in which he confused Smyth, who was wearing bloomers having cycled to his office, for a bicycle repair man. He described her as a, “law unto herself” who, when conducting at a Promenade Concert, “went up to my rostrum, took up by baton and surveyed its length critically. Deciding that it was more than she could manage, she calmly snapped it in two, threw away one half and conducted with the other.” 4 Arnold Bax also described her physical appearance and behaviour in his autobiography. He recalled Smyth, “attired in tweeds, heavy boots, and a deerstalker hat,” who, “shouted in a parade-ground voice.”

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3 This list is by no means exhaustive and represents a sample only of the wide range of historical accounts of Smyth.
Thomas Beecham’s account of visiting Smyth in Holloway Prison in 1912 is one of the most frequently quoted stories about her. He wrote:

I arrived in the main courtyard of the prison to find the noble company of martyrs marching round it and singing lustily their war-chant while the composer, beaming approbation from an overlooking upper window, beat time in almost Bacchic frenzy with a toothbrush.

He described her as, “without question the most remarkable of her sex that I have been privileged to know” with, “fiery energy and unrelenting fixity of purpose.... [She] was not the easiest of colleagues, and her frequent efforts at direct action ... hindered rather than forwarded the aim which everyone wanted just as much to attain.” Beecham later described her as a “grand curiosity.” Another colleague, Bruno Walter, described her at their first meeting as “a gaunt Englishwoman of about forty-eight clad in a nondescript baggy dress” with an “unconventional manner” and “remarkable for the consuming fire of her soul.”

The private correspondence of her friends gives a further example of how her contemporaries referred to her. Written without necessarily being intended for publication these letters provide another view of Smyth. Once published they have contributed to the image of her that remains today.

Virginia Woolf wrote frequently of Smyth in her diary and letters. Her exasperation with Smyth often comes through in the entries. In August 1930, six months after their first meeting Woolf wrote in her diary: “she cannot get over her own ill-treatment ... of her own music, and the conspiracy against her – for the Press are determined to burke [evade/silence] her, though she fills every hall – thats the line of it.” However, Woolf also admired and praised her:

She is of the race of pioneers, of path-makers. She has gone before and felled trees and blasted rocks and built bridges and thus made a way for those who come after her.... We honour her not merely as a musician and as writer, but also as a blaster of rocks and the maker of bridges. It seems a pity that a woman who only wished to write music should have been forced also to make bridges, but that was part of her job and she did it.

Other friends were less kind. Ottoline Morrell, a friend of both Woolf’s and Smyth’s described her, in a letter to Woolf, as an “old buccaneer” and her visits as

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“invasions.”12 Harold Nicolson in his letters to Vita Sackville-West, described his meetings with Smyth, portraying her in a less than favourable light and being rather unkind about her deafness and appearance: “[She] screamed loud in her indignation,” and later, “her hair was coming down and she mistook her muffler for a handkerchief.”13

All these accounts focus on her physical appearance and behaviour. Although the authors do mention her music (Walter, Beecham and Wood all conducted her works and supported her career) in all accounts she comes across as something of an amusing oddity, an eccentric remembered with patronising fondness.

In caricature, both E. F. Benson and Woolf highlighted her “masculine” and eccentric traits. Smyth was caricatured in *Dodo* by Benson, son of her good friend Mary and E. W. Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury. In *Dodo* she appears thinly disguised as the composer Edith Staines, alike in their habits, dress and appearance. Edith Staines is loud and outspoken, she smokes and enjoys game shooting, she has many German friends, had a near conversion to Roman Catholicism (as did Smyth immediately prior to meeting the Bensons) and composed a Mass and several operas. Benson captured many of Smyth’s traits:

‘The worst of it is,’ said Edith, ‘I care for such lots of things. [sic] There’s my music, and then there’s any sort of game – have you ever seen me play tennis? – and there isn’t time for everything. I am a musician, and a good shot, and an excellent rider, and a woman, and heaps of other things. It isn’t conceit when I say so – I simply know it!’14

Smyth discusses *Dodo* in *As Time Went On* and suggests that she believed Edith Staines to be the “one decent character in the book!”15 In *Between the Acts*, Woolf portrayed Smyth as Miss La Trobe, the director of a village play.

Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language – perhaps, then, she wasn’t altogether a lady? At any rate, she had a passion for getting things up.16

These caricatures serve as an indication of how her public persona was treated by her friends and portrayed in a comic light for the general public.

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Despite her complaints that she was left out of music histories, she did appear in many during her lifetime. However, she was not always given treatment equal to her male colleagues, and many of the accounts focused on her gender. Most grappled with assessing her position in music history, bringing up the issue of "greatness" and categorising her as a "woman composer." Some discussed her music in gendered terms. All discussed her other roles (author, suffragette) and most mentioned her large number of friends and the perceived lack of commitment to composition which she demonstrated. Often these factors, together with some mention of her character, eccentricity, and personal habits, outweigh the discussion of her music and her career as a composer. The accounts in music history question her feminist arguments (if they mention them at all) and suggest that her claim that women were discriminated against was contradicted by Smyth's own success.

Her gender dominated discussion about her career and her work. She was perceived as a curiosity in her lifetime because she was a woman who wrote large-scale works and sought professional status. Some have suggested that this rarity helped her gain performances of her works. McNaught suggested that performances were aided by:

a kind of special pleading on behalf of a great-hearted woman who was also a popular public figure; all the world admired her fighting spirit; and there was the attraction of something curious and unique – an opera composed by a woman.... Who would have dared to tell her that her sex had been, not a hindrance, but a positive help?\(^\text{17}\)

This "curiosity" continued in discussions of her music style. Her music was discussed in terms of the expectations of a woman composer, usually with a tone of surprise that a woman could write large-scale works. "Virile" and "masterly" were words often used to describe Smyth's music. In 1911 a reviewer in the \textit{Pall Mall Gazette} remarked on the "virile power of climax" in her music\(^\text{18}\) and the article on Smyth in \textit{Grove 5} goes further, equating this virility with masculinity. The implication is that she is writing like a man which the author viewed favourably.

[the Mass] definitely placed the composer easily at the head of all those of her own sex. The most striking thing about it was the entire absence of the qualities that are usually associated with feminine productions; throughout it was virile, masterly in construction and workmanship.\(^\text{19}\)

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\(^{17}\) McNaught. "Dame Ethel Smyth.": 211.


Smyth was known by many as the author of amusing biographical and autobiographical sketches. McNaught and other critics went as far to suggest that her books were better than her music. In her own time she was known as much as an author as a composer. Her obituary in the *Musical Times* included the statement:

> It may be – in fact it seems to be generally believed – that her books will do more than her music to preserve and brighten her fame, and that she will ultimately rank as a brilliant author and a remarkable character who also made some stir by composing music on an ambitious scale for a woman.\(^\text{20}\)

In the obituary in *The Times* the writer again suggested that her music was not so important. “It may be suggested that it was not as a musical composer that she made her strongest mark. She had a greater command of words than of notes.”\(^\text{21}\)

This view was repeated in music history books as critics continued to suggest that her music could be viewed as having lesser importance. “There is further division of opinion as between the significance of her literary work on the one hand and her music on the other.”\(^\text{22}\) However, while most critics commented on her writings they rarely mentioned her feminist essays, referring instead to her autobiographical and biographical writings.

Smyth’s involvement with the suffrage movement and her feminist arguments were frequently seen as something to ridicule, or something that distracted her from the more worthy occupation of composition. Many articles mention that she was a suffragette and talk about her personal fight for recognition but do not mention the wider context of her arguments or her essays. For example, there is no mention of her feminist beliefs or involvement in the suffrage movement, nor of its importance to Smyth in *The Times* article “To Fight or to Work?” This is perhaps surprising given that the article examines some of the reasons why she did not have such a large output and comments on her “unnecessary battles.”

The strength and importance of Smyth’s arguments, and the reality of the position for women in music, was frequently not acknowledged or was downplayed. McNaught remarked that, “she had won the right to be heard; in the post-war world no barrier of sex-prejudice stood in a woman’s path (though that was contrary to her fixed belief).”\(^\text{23}\) Many remarked that her arguments were contrary to her own position, ignoring the fact that she was speaking on behalf of all women.

\(^\text{20}\) McNaught. “Dame Ethel Smyth.”: 212.
musicians as well as having to fight very hard for any professional gain. A writer in *The Times* used just such an argument:

Though she was convinced that in England women composers and performers were not given a fair chance, she herself had the degree of D. Mus conferred on her by Durham University in 1910 and by Oxford University in 1926; St. Andrews made her a D. Litt in 1928.24

This line of argument was frequently used by critics, whether explicitly or implicitly, to dismiss her feminist writings. It is apparent that some critics did not share her opinion that women composers were discriminated against, or that she personally suffered any discrimination. Scott Goddard wrote in 1946:

She was her own clamorous publicist, insisting in a series of brilliant books of reminiscence upon the hardships of her lot and the crass male obstructionism which, in common with a minority of her readers, she considered to have militated against her chances.25 [my italics]

This attitude, which appears to have been prevalent during Smyth’s lifetime and beyond, has contributed to the dismissal of her essays and argument as unimportant or unworthy of attention. Ironically, her decision to devote time to the suffrage movement, and her subsequent commitment to feminism, had a major negative impact on her representation in history. Many critics suggested that if Smyth had devoted herself more to composition she would have achieved greater success.26 A critic in *The Times* remarked on Smyth’s “battles” and suggested that many were “unnecessary” making the suggestion that politics and art do not mix: “fighting is not conducive to the business of composing music. The chief mistake of Ethel Smyth’s musical career was that she forgot that it is a composer’s business, first, last, and most of the time, to compose.”27 Much has been said about her decision to give up two years to the suffrage movement and the tone of many critics suggests that they did not approve of Smyth’s involvement. Thomas Beecham, for example, remarked that the time she spent in the suffrage movement was an “unfortunate diversion.”28 McNaught called it a “disturbing side-issue.”29 However, by implying that the battles were “unnecessary” the writer suggests that the cause (the vote for women and the status of women in music) was unnecessary,

27 “Ethel Smyth: To Fight or to Work?”: 6.
and denies, therefore, that there was any discrimination or prejudice which Smyth had to confront in order to compose.

In general, critics commented on Smyth's apparent lack of commitment to a professional music life citing her numerous friendships, her interest in travel and the time she spent with the suffrage movement. They remarked that all these things took time away from her composition; suggesting that she was not really serious as a composer.

A large part of her life [was] taken up by the cult of friendship, a time-absorbing occupation that called her to many places. She seems to have had a passion for travel.... We are compelled to ask whether so much gadding about was consistent with her ambition to stand forth as a composer. It is open to conjecture that she would have made a stronger mark in the artistic world had she stuck more closely to the job of composing.30

There are a number of well-read music texts published during Smyth's lifetime in which she is not mentioned even though the subject focus might have warranted it. Cecil Gray's A Survey of Contemporary Music (1928) devotes chapters to the English composers Elgar and Bernard van Dieren, and a chapter containing references to Joseph Holbrooke, Granville Bantock, Eugene Goossens, Arthur Bliss, and Lord Berners. Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Arnold Bax are all accorded a paragraph outlining their work but Smyth is not mentioned. Cecile Chaminade is mentioned in passing, merely acknowledging that she is a composer. Gray revealed his opinion on women composers in a paragraph on Germaine Tailleferre:

Of Mlle Germaine Tailleferre one can only repeat Dr. Johnson's dictum concerning a woman preacher, transposed into terms of music: 'Sir, a woman's composing is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.' Considered apart from her sex, her music is wholly negligible.31

In books where she was mentioned, Smyth and other women composers were frequently accorded separate status. In Contemporary British Composers (1925), for example, Joseph Holbrooke devotes individual chapters to composers such as Edward Elgar, Bantock, Rutland Boughton, Havergal Brian, Lord Berners and others but discusses "women composers" in a short, separate chapter.32 However,

despite the grouping of the women composers (Ethel Smyth, Rebecca Clarke and Dorothy Howell) Smyth is given more attention than for example, Samuel Coleridge Taylor, who gets a mere paragraph despite being indexed separately. Holbrooke emphasises Smyth’s small output, and quotes at length from Our Favourite Composers by Sydney Grew. In grouping the women composers together and not indexing their names separately Holbrooke contributes to their marginalisation in history.

In the years after Smyth’s death the accounts of her career in history books changed little. Critics remained concerned with her status in English music and as a woman composer, and confused by the significance of her feminism. Immediately after her death in 1944 critics attempted to assess her career and status in history. All grappled with the issue of her gender. McNaught attempted to deal with this in the obituary he wrote:

All in all, where does Ethel Smyth stand as a composer? If we substitute ‘woman composer’ (which she would not allow) she stands unchallenged at the head of the list. Others have had greater worldly success, but on a lower plane and a smaller scale; others, too, among the moderns, have composed with more subtlety of mind, but with less public notice.

McNaught drew this conclusion after dismissing virtually all of her compositions (“lack of operatic skill ... no recognizable Smyth manner”) only admitting that, “she was an instrumental composer who misdirected her gifts in pursuit of the public rewards of opera.” In 1946 Scott Goddard wrote: “Opinion differs as to whether she should be considered one of the first, most capable composers of her time or the greatest female composer of all to date.” Even during her lifetime she was considered, “one of the distinguished composers of England, and one of the outstanding women composers of her generation.” It was suggested that, “as a composer she had a notable and, for a woman, quite exceptional talent.” This desire to judge her as a woman composer in a separate category, and to conclude that she was the best in that category (after criticising her compositions)

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Joseph Speaight, Lord Berners, Benjamin Dale, William Baines, and Felix White. The two remaining chapters cover “some others” (including Edward German, Hamilton Harty, and Walford Davies) and “women composers.”

33 He describes Howell as a “budding young composer” and Clarke as “the most advanced of the lady songsters.” Holbrooke. Contemporary British Composers: 304.

34 McNaught. “Dame Ethel Smyth.”: 212.

35 McNaught. “Dame Ethel Smyth.”: 211.


38 Fuller-Maitland and Coilles. “Dame Ethel Smyth.”: 862.
demonstrates a belief, by those writers at least, that the category “women composers” will always be inferior. These statements contradict the conclusion reached by the writer of The Times obituary who wrote: “Dame Ethel Smyth won her lifelong battle for the right of a woman to be, not a woman-composer, but just a composer, an artist to be taken as seriously as one of the opposite sex may expect to be taken.” This statement appears to be erroneous, or at least premature, in light of the continuing assessment of her career in terms of her gender.

Further to this, historians appeared concerned with citing her as the first woman to achieve status as a composer. In so doing they again did not have to consider how she compared with her male colleagues in terms of status and implied, by placing her in a separate category, that she did not fit the stereotype of a mainstream composer. As a result of her Mass and operas, critics noted that she was, “the first English woman to achieve something of a reputation as a composer.” Frank Howes suggested that her ability to write in the larger forms should qualify her for judgement alongside her male colleagues.

Ethel Smyth was the first woman to compose music in the largest forms of opera, oratorio and concerto, and to convince the sceptical world of music in England and in Germany that musical talent in a woman was not confined to salon music, such as Madame Chaminade wrote gracefully, but could take its place beside that of the most serious-minded men.

More recently critics have been concerned with her status and her gender, and the impact of these factors on her ability to gain performances of her works. In 1979 Peter Pirie wrote:

Why women should not be great composers is one of the mysteries, but, although in the latter half of the twentieth century there are many women composers, none of them is in the front rank; and neither, alas, was Ethel Smyth. It was her ferocious energy rather than her talent that gained her so many performances during her life.

Derek Hyde has also argued “that because she was a woman her music did arouse more initial interest than if she had been a man.” These views were prevalent among her contemporaries and subsequent historians, but are almost impossible to assess. Too many other factors contribute to an individual’s ability to gain

performances of their works. However, the non-committal conclusion reached by the writer in the *Oxford Companion to Music* is not satisfactory either:

> It is the opinion of some (as it was of herself) that had she been a man she would have been enabled more quickly to make her mark as a composer, and of others that she would with difficulty have made it at all. It is perhaps fair to consider that these views cancel each other out, leaving sex as no important factor in the sum.\(^{44}\)

Smyth’s gender did play a role in her career as a composer: the difficulties she had gaining access to education and overcoming gender-based stereotypes demonstrate that her gender played a significant role.

Critics continued to discuss her music in gendered terms. In 1967 Percy Young wrote: “Ethel Smyth, a robust character distinguished for her suffragette activities, studied in Leipzig and developed a style that was both masculine and Teutonic.”\(^{45}\) Even as recently as 1988 Nigel Burton wrote of *The Wreckers* that, “its predominant quality is its masculinity” noting, however, that this was, “an evaluation which might have displeased Smyth.”\(^{46}\) Such remarks suggest that the style of her music and her chosen genres continue to confuse critics.

Writers have continued to dismiss her essays on women in music. Hyde believed they are the least satisfactory of her writings, “not because of what she has to say,” but suggesting that it was because she was a propagandist who relied on anecdote and sweeping generalisations which clouded her vision.\(^{47}\) In dismissing the essays too easily on the grounds of Smyth’s approach, Hyde fails to appreciated the strength and importance of her arguments. In general little mention was made of her feminist essays and the belief remained among historians that she wasted time and energy on causes such as women’s suffrage and for women musicians instead of concentrating on composition.

Many critics continued to focus on the non-musical aspects of Smyth’s life. A reviewer in *Tempo* in 1958, writing of the tribute programme on the BBC Home Service to mark the centenary of her birth, remarked:

> Although Beecham, Boult, and Walter drew attention to the quality of Ethel Smyth’s work, the time was spent upon a salute to a ‘character’ whose eccentricities, it was obviously felt, should not be allowed to go unregarded.... her bikes, her dogs, her tennis, her golf, her feminism, her clothes and even her embarrassingly improvised paper handkerchiefs....

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Nevertheless, it is better not to lose sight of the fact that this strange, combative, tough, sentimental, boisterous woman was a real composer.\footnote{Tempo (Summer 1958): 3.}

The prevailing view, even as late as 1985, was to focus on her personality, character and extra-musical aspects. Her books had by now fallen out of the public interest, leaving only the stories of her eccentricity and resigning her music to oblivion. Michael Trend in *The Music Makers*, for instance, suggested that she is remembered as “a character and a celebrated sapphist” and that her music is justifiably, according to Trend, ignored.\footnote{Michael Trend. *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance*. London, 1985. 93.}

The manner in which Smyth has been portrayed has contributed to the lack of attention given to her feminist writings. Smyth was well aware of the manner in which she was written about and the image she projected, but she made no attempt to change the image or to conform to a stereotype. In 1936 she wrote:

> Because I have conducted my own operas and love sheepdogs; because I generally dress in tweeds, and sometimes, at winter afternoon concerts, have even conducted in them; because I was a militant suffragette and seized a chance of beating time to ‘The March of the Women’ from the window of my cell in Holloway Prison with a tooth-brush; because I have written books, spoken speeches, broadcast, and don’t always make sure that my hat is on straight; for these and other equally pertinent reasons, in a certain sense I am well known.... But it does not alter the fact that after having been on the job, so to speak, for over forty years, I have never yet succeeded in becoming even a tiny wheel in the English music machine; nor did this fantastic latter-day notoriety even pave the way – much that it might have done! – to inclusion in programme schemes!\footnote{Smyth. *As Time Went On*: 288-89.}

The image of Smyth presented in the pre-feminist history books, media, and music journals was undoubtedly an attempt to determine her place in music history. There were several aspects of her career that made writing her history so problematic for critics that they felt the need to constantly refer to her gender and to the non-musical sides of her life. Because Smyth mainly composed in large-scale genres she challenged perceptions about women composers. In addition, her commitment to the suffrage movement and feminism challenged notions of accepted roles for professional composers.

Smyth did not conform to existing stereotypes of “lady” composers. She wrote a *Mass*, six operas, a Double Concerto for violin and horn and *The Prison*, a symphony for soprano and bass solo, choir and orchestra. She also wrote chamber music, songs and other smaller works but her real interest lay in dramatic works.
Many critics questioned her reasons for concentrating almost exclusively on opera, suggesting that this contributed in numerous ways to her position in England. The suggestion was made that had she composed a larger number of smaller works she would have succeeded in creating more of a name for herself.51

Smyth was determined to prove that women were capable of composing in the larger genres. She wrote of her decision to focus on opera as, “no hardship to one whom the idea of creating human beings and clothing them in music drew like a magnet.”52 As Smyth herself recognised, her gender, her nationality, and in England her foreign education all contributed to create difficulties in gaining performances. However, she maintained her determination to compose opera throughout her career and did not turn to the traditional forms associated with women composers (songs, small piano pieces and chamber works). The effect of this was that she stood apart from the few other women composers recognised by society and she constantly challenged society’s perceptions of the “lady composer.” This inevitably made establishing her career and professional status more difficult. However, had she chosen to compose in the smaller forms associated with women she would have been marginalised for conforming to the stereotype. This was the double-bind that women composers of her generation found themselves in.

A number of issues surrounding her status as a professional composer have also contributed to the difficulties music historians have had with assessing her status. While she did consider herself to be professional she was not totally reliant on composition for her income. Her sister Mary often paid her travel expenses around Europe, and acted as a hostess for Smyth’s events in London and at Hill Hall in Epping Forest, Essex.53 Mary Dodge paid for the land and building of her house Coign, near Woking. Dodge, Empress Eugénie and others paid for her works to be published. Dodge gave £1,000 towards the 1909 production of *The Wreckers* with Beecham. Smyth also supported herself with the publication of her books and commented that, “it is great fun being well paid for work I find much easier than composing.”54 She acknowledged that she was fortunate for a “small independent income which rendered possible a continuous struggle for musical existence such as no woman obliged to earn her livelihood in music could have carried on.”55 Because she was not bound by financial demands nor restricted to smaller or more

53 Mary Hunter acted as a patron to Ethel Smyth. Her social circle included John Singer Sargent, Thomas Beecham, Percy Grainger (who played piano for her ‘at homes’ in circa 1911) Henry James and Rodin.
commercially viable works, she had the leisure to compose fewer and bigger works.

Her professional status was problematic for some critics because of her other very public passions in life. Those who questioned her commitment to composition and suggested that she spent too much time fighting for women's rights, travelling and writing have implied that her professional status was questionable. Professionalism "implies commitment to a profession or an occupation that is one's primary or exclusive occupation." Many critics felt that Smyth did not meet this criterion, that, as someone who had many other interests in life and devoted time to "unnecessary" causes, she compromised her seriousness as a professional composer. Smyth, however, did not want to compromise her status as a professional and recognised that women were too easily pigeon-holed as teachers and amateur musicians.

Smyth was also aware of the criticism that she gave up too much time for the suffrage movement. She described herself as having deliberately,

queered her own pitch ... by leaving the field of action in order to devote two years to the cause of Woman Suffrage at that critical moment of a musician's career when headway is being made at last.... Need I say that I do not regret my action, and should do the same again? Smyth was also aware of the criticism that she gave up too much time for the suffrage movement. She described herself as having deliberately,

queered her own pitch ... by leaving the field of action in order to devote two years to the cause of Woman Suffrage at that critical moment of a musician's career when headway is being made at last.... Need I say that I do not regret my action, and should do the same again?57

It was a difficult decision for Smyth to make at the time, since she felt she was beginning to gain performances and recognition. However, the battle was important since she believed one factor in particular, her gender, influenced her status in music. She attributed her position to, "my sex, my foreign musical education, and the conditions of English music life," suggesting, "it may be conceded that a person who began life with two such gross blunders as being born fifty years too soon and of the wrong sex deserves to have a bad time of it."59

She also recognised the effect that her career as an author could have on her position as a composer. While she struggled to gain performances, her books went into reprints and gained her a large readership. She saw from the publication of ImpressionsthatRemained that this could stimulate an interest in her compositions and her career and she used the publications of the books to draw greater attention to the "plight" of women composers. Her books increasingly commented on her position as a woman composer in the male-dominated profession, and even those books that were largely autobiographical contain strongly feminist arguments, as evidenced in "A Life Summed Up" in As Time Went On, in which Smyth outlines

59 Ethel Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 37.
some of the reasons, as she perceived them, for her position and status in English music.

The image of Smyth in history began to change with the development of women in music studies from the 1980s. Smyth began to be acknowledged as a feminist musician who made an important contribution to research and debate on the position of women in music. Feminist research has acknowledged that Smyth’s status in history has been influenced by her non-musical contributions and reputation. Elizabeth Wood claims that much of the historical appraisal of Smyth is flawed.

If she did not disappear from the narrative, she has not escaped the distortion of stereotype, the dismay of caricature. The significance of her profoundly feminist politics, her homosexuality, and the creative depth of her anger has eluded most critics, literary or musicological.60

The new studies challenged the earlier accounts of Smyth and have called for a reassessment of her position and her feminist contribution. Kathleen Abromeit believed that, “her political activism helped to allow women of the future the opportunity to pursue activities that would enrich their lives and artistic freedom.”61 Jane Bernstein agreed that, “Ethel Smyth stands alone as an important pioneer whose fight for recognition and efforts as a composer, writer, and feminist paved the way toward a new age in music.”62 Others have recognised Smyth’s importance as a precursor to the feminist musicology movement. Marcia Citron describes her as “the first woman to articulate in so direct a manner the subtle and overt types of discrimination facing women musicians.”63 Citron effectively acknowledges Smyth as an early feminist musicologist in Gender and the Musical Canon, citing her writings as evidence.64 Elizabeth Wood, in her outline of Smyth’s views on women in music in “Women, Music and Ethel Smyth,” notes that it is in her books that Smyth, “develops and polishes her analyses of the politics of music and the ways in which women have been excluded from them. While she gives counsel for change, she relies more on examples from her own experience than on

63 Citron. “European Composers and Musicians, 1880-1918.”: 140.
64 Citron. Gender and the Musical Canon: 60, 76.
theory to trigger effective strategies."\textsuperscript{65} It is this reliance upon personal experience that has caused many of her contemporaries to overlook her essays.

Smyth has been acknowledged as a feminist writer by researchers in the fields of women's history and women's studies. Smyth's feminism is described in Olive Banks' \textit{Biographical Dictionary of British Feminists}: "Her approach was a decidedly modern one in that she saw clearly how deeply sex prejudice was built into the whole structure of the music profession."\textsuperscript{66} Dale Spender has suggested that Smyth deserves more attention and includes her in a list of feminist theorists in her book \textit{Women of Ideas}.\textsuperscript{67} Even during her own lifetime she was celebrated for her work in feminism: in 1940 the Six Point Group honoured her, alongside Vera Brittain and Lady Astor, for her contribution to the cause of women.\textsuperscript{68} The acknowledgment of Smyth's feminism now needs to be extended from these fields into musicology.

Assessing Smyth's career has been problematic, particularly during her lifetime. As a woman who defied the existing stereotype of a "lady" composer by working almost exclusively in large-scale forms she forced critics to take notice of her music and career. However, her gender, her music and her feminist politics distorted her contribution to music history. Many writers resorted to focusing on the extra-musical aspects of her career while underestimating both her music and her feminism. Many of Smyth's critics did not agree with her assessment of the position of women in music. They believed that her views on discrimination were invalid because they were informed solely by personal experience and they consequently dismissed her arguments. The prevailing image of Smyth as an eccentric character who unfortunately did not devote herself fully to composition negates the significance of both her music and her feminist arguments. The assessment of Smyth's feminist arguments in the light of modern feminist musicology can engender a new assessment of her career that acknowledges the significance of her theories and their impact on her representation in history.

\textsuperscript{65} Wood. "Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth: A Pathway in the Politics of Music.": 130.
CHAPTER THREE
FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE TO FEMINIST THEORY:
WOMEN AS MUSICIANS

In her essays on women in music published in three books during a twelve year period, *Streaks of Life* (1921), *A Final Burning of Boats* (1928) and *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), Ethel Smyth's fundamental arguments reflect much of the contemporary thought.\(^1\) The essays cover practical issues for women musicians, including access to education, professional opportunities, the effects of prejudice and discrimination, and theoretical issues being addressed by feminists in many fields, primarily those concerning sexual difference.

Public perception of her motives for writing on women in music issues and the use of autobiographical examples to illustrate her arguments allowed the essays to be overlooked as personal and biased feminist writing. Challenging this perception of her essays, and arguing that they actually speak for her contemporary women musicians is the focus of this chapter. Smyth's arguments, extracted from the three essays, are juxtaposed with known social data to demonstrate that the views she expressed on the position of women in music represented actual conditions for many.

Smyth was one of a small number of women to speak openly during the 1920s and 1930s on prejudice facing women musicians in England. She was strongly criticised for doing so but she was forthright about instances of discrimination she experienced during her career, in particular regarding performances of her works. Although her essays dealt with a wide range of issues which were not exclusively about her own situation, many critics considered that she was merely complaining about her own treatment and "failure" to achieve greater success.\(^2\) Smyth believed,

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however, that she was speaking on behalf of all women musicians by explaining the historical, social, and practical factors behind the position of women and offered her theories on some of the issues facing women musicians. Her essays cover a broad range of feminist issues being debated in England in the 1920s and 1930s and reflect the thinking of the period. Although her essays do rely on her own personal experience, and although her arguments are largely anecdotal, they realistically assess the position of women composers during the period.

Her first essay, in *Streaks of Life* (1921), largely deals with the situation of music in England, and the expected renaissance in English music as a result of purging the country of German influences. Writing post-war, Smyth concluded that the musical renaissance in fact had not happened, and examined the reasons why. Having concluded that there was a lack of passion in music-making in England, Smyth stated her belief that the situation could be remedied by the "gradual interpenetration of the life musical by women." Smyth believed women to be more enthusiastic, devoted and harder working compared to the "war-weary" men and that a woman, having "found out her powers, glories in them now, and only asks to go on using them." These attitudes were prevalent among feminists at the time. However, in the post-war backlash working women were seen as a threat to men's jobs and were being removed from those they had held during the war merely on grounds of their sex. Smyth demonstrated that this was happening in music also, citing the case of the Hallé Orchestra, who dismissed all the women players in 1920. The essay focused on women's equal access to job opportunities, a major issue concerning all feminists at the time.

The second essay, in *A Final Burning of Boats*, expanded on these ideas. It too was inspired by an earlier article published in 1924 which examined the prejudice toward women receiving recognition for their work. Smyth felt compelled to revisit the subject in 1928: "whereas once upon a time men ruled the roost almost to the complete exclusion of women, today not even the staunchest club-window Die-Hard can disguise from himself the fact that this happy state of things is gone beyond recall!" Smyth examined the position of women in the arts in general, looking at the barriers of prejudice. She developed the concept of "sex antagonism," a popular theme amongst feminists at this time, to account for contemporary negative attitudes towards an increasing number of prominent

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3 This essay was based on an article written in 1916 and published in the *English Review* under the title "England, Women and Music."


6 The article was published as "A Burning of Boats" in the *London Mercury."

women. Her essay also dealt with issues of women’s professionalism and her belief in a female voice in composition. While the first essay concentrated mainly on the problems facing women orchestral musicians and avoided any reference to her own situation _A Final Burning of Boats_ discussed the broader range of issues facing all women musicians and contained an autobiographical section to illustrate her arguments, outlining her own battles with prejudice throughout her career.

_Female Pipings in Eden_ is the third and most clearly elucidated essay. Smyth examined the question, “why have there been no great women composers?” and attempted to outline the historical reasons by pointing out the numerous difficulties faced by women composers. She examined training and professional opportunities, focusing in particular on the situation for women in orchestras. She contrasted literary and musical careers to illustrate the particular difficulties for composers and looked at the attitudes and prejudices of male colleagues which combined to create further difficulties for women musicians. Smyth concluded the essay with her thoughts on a female voice in music composition. Throughout the essay, she used examples from her own career to illustrate her arguments, and gave an “autobiographical logbook” recounting the difficulties she experienced in gaining performances of her Mass and operas. This essay was strongly influenced by Virginia Woolf’s feminist essay _A Room of One’s Own_. Woolf’s style of cultural analysis influenced Smyth’s approach and Woolf also gave her considerable practical advice during the writing of the essay.

Her motives for publishing on the subject were both political and personal. She wished to make public the discrimination women musicians experienced, and she desired to show herself as a role model for future women composers and to reassure other women composers that they were not alone. In doing so she also had the opportunity to record the prejudice and discrimination she had faced in her own career in an attempt to explain her position and status.

Through her experiences in the suffrage movement Smyth became more acutely aware of the political and social position of women in society. She saw the value and necessity of making public, discrimination facing women in music and the often hidden prejudices against women. In the introduction to _A Final Burning of Boats_, Smyth stated:

‘A Final Burning of Boats’ is a rapid autobiographical survey in which of course music plays a part. But the real theme, which the autobiography merely illustrates, is the re-shaping of the eternal sex-problem in these new post-war times of ours – a rather portentous subject that concerns every man and every woman alive today.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Virginia Woolf. _A Room of One’s Own_. London: Hogarth Press, 1929.

\(^9\) Smyth. _A Final Burning of Boats_: 1-2.
She used autobiography as an example because she believed that the prejudices she suffered were experienced by all professional women and she attempted to make sense of it on behalf of other women. She wrote in *A Final Burning of Boats*: “But having alluded often in these pages to my own music – as of course was inevitable ... it is the music of other women that was really in my mind most of the time.”

Part of her reason for publishing was to provide a role model for women. In 1928 she wrote: “Someone, that is to say some woman, must speak out; and being at odd moments a writer as well as a composer, I have no choice.” She did not believe that she had anything to lose by being outspoken on the subject:

A woman whose friendships with men are so numerous and so warm as mine is unlikely to be taken for a fanatical feminist or a confirmed hater of men. Nor have I any axe to grind, for at this hour of the day the battle of my life is practically over, and I neither know nor care if it has been lost or won. On the other hand, by virtue of musical equipment and such share of intelligence as I possess, I think I have some right to speak out straight to the men in whose power it lies to help or hinder – though not, thank God, to permanently hold up – the women of today and tomorrow in music.

It is likely too that Smyth recognised publication as a way of ensuring her own place in history. Virginia Woolf believed that part of Smyth’s reason for writing so prolifically of her life and of the difficulties facing women in music was also to ensure a correct representation of her career. Woolf wrote in note form in her diary on 19 March 1931:

Ethel yesterday, very uneasy about her character, and possible misrepresentations. I think deluding herself about her own motives in countering reviewers: (purely for the sake of other musicians, women in particular: I’ve nothing to lose: have suffered neglect etc all my life).

Smyth’s main desire, however, was to be remembered as a composer rather than as an author. In 1936 she wrote: “It sometimes saddens me to think that during my lifetime I have had no chance of making myself musically known to my countrymen and women as I have done in books.” She did recognise, however, that the publication of her autobiographies stimulated interest in her music and

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possibly she hoped that these essays would go some way to completing the picture of her situation.

By using her own career to illustrate her arguments Smyth left herself vulnerable to criticism that she was merely complaining about her position in the music scene. However, Smyth believed she justified being autobiographical in her essays to demonstrate by way of personal example, the prejudices and difficulties facing women musicians. She felt strongly about the prejudice she had faced in her own career and it was the politicising of these personal issues that led her to a belief in feminism and to fight for women's rights. She was well aware of the consequences of using her own case in her essays, but felt it was the most direct way of getting her message across. In March 1924 she wrote in her diary that she had published, "a most important article by me in the London Mercury called 'A Burning of Boats.' I think it will dish [ruin] me, but do lots of good. Anyhow it is good to get the truth off my chest about the sort of contest my life has been." Woolf held grave reservations about this approach and disliked the use of autobiography to make the case:

Your case is that there are a thousand others. Leave your own case out of it; theirs will be far far stronger. Enough, I only say this because – well, I didn't write 'A Room' without considerable feeling even you will admit; I'm not cool on the subject. I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious, legendary. Woolf warned her that her manner could be wrongly construed and suggested to Smyth that she approach the subject in a totally different manner, to avoid any suggestion of having a grievance.

Give all the facts and all the dates; the more the better; but let them be about other people, not E.S. My own longing in reading your article is to escape the individual; and to be told simply, plainly, objectively in 1880 there was not a single woman in an orchestra; there was not a single teacher to teach women harmony; the expense of going to Berlin was 165 pound ten; eight women were educated partly by 1891; in 1902 [Henry] Wood took five violinists women into his orchestra; the number increased, and is now – (here a table) ... and so on, all the way through. But to be told My opera was not played because – My mass was only played once Elgars 17 times – to have to listen to anecdotes, hearsay ... I will think make any moderately intelligent moderately sensitive man or woman feel – Oh the womans got a grievance about her self.

However, it was not possible for Smyth to argue her case in any other way and she strongly believed that it was important for her case to be known.

I very definitely desire that women shall know how it was with me, and here is my reason. As the years pass, one forgets facts it once took an agonising effort to ignore.... And once you are dead, perspective with its colossal illusions gets to work.... I want [women] to realise that they are not as alone as they perhaps believe; that we women have all travelled that road and are helping where we can.\(^\text{18}\)

It has not been possible to establish whether Smyth encountered any difficulties in publishing her essays. *Streaks of Life* and *A Final Burning of Boats*, which are both largely memoirs, were published by Longmans, Green and Co., who published most of her books. On the advice of the Woolfs, however, *Female Pipings in Eden* was published by Peter Davies, the only volume of her books to be published by that company. The backlash against feminism and women's issues in the 1920s and 1930s made it more difficult for those writing in the area. Woolf wrote to Smyth in 1938 about her book *Three Guineas*, her "sequel" to *A Room of One's Own*: "[It] is selling very well, tho' none of the shops at first would take it. Not a novel, they said, and the public won't touch anything controversial about women."\(^\text{19}\) This backlash against women in the post-war climate of the 1920s in England, and the effect this had on women musicians, actually motivated Smyth to write on the subject. The introduction to *Streaks of Life* indicates her view in 1921 and her wish to fight against the return to conservative attitudes to women.

Dr. Flora Murray's wonderful book 'Women as Army Surgeons' dispels the illusion that the medical fight is won; the male medical students at University College are now trying to squash female competition; the Hallé Orchestra has sacked its women members, none of whom replaced fighting men, and so on.... We all know, that the root of the matter is selfishness and fear.... Women must stand firm against tyranny, and not meet it with any description of smile – whether hypocritical, philosophical, or diplomatic.\(^\text{20}\)

Whatever her motives for publishing, the subject matter she was concerned with predominantly was the lack of significant major women composers in England and what she perceived to be the dynamics within the social structure which propagated this deficit. She examined women's education and training in music and focused in particular on the position of women in professional


orchestras, to demonstrate her argument that women have been denied equal opportunities to develop their skills. Smyth revealed the prejudice and discrimination experienced by women in music and the effect this has had on the position of women musicians. The issue of labelling women composers and reviewing music by women in gendered terms was raised. She also sensed that women, historically and in her own time, were being left out of history books.

Above all Smyth was concerned with the question of why there are no "great" women composers. Questions were raised about women as composers and the possible reasons why women had not made the same progress as women writers. In her essays Smyth challenged the views of the period that suggested that women were not capable of composition. She summarised the position in Female Pipings in Eden:

> Most of us have heard friendly commentators remark, that though the liberal education of women is only in its infancy, we have already made a distinct mark in literature. If, then, nothing of the sort seems happening in music, surely it must be owing to some congenital defect in the female brain – some mysterious recalcitrancy to musical creation?  

This line of questioning was current throughout the period, with many commentators examining the issue. The public debate on women’s intellectual and creative abilities began in the 1860s. As increasing numbers of women performers entered the professional arena in music, questions were raised about women’s ability to compose. Many of the writers on the subject were not aware of the existence of women composers in the past, and together with the growing emphasis on professionalism in composition, women composers from the nineteenth century tended to be overlooked in their discussions.

The early commentators on the subject used the theories of scientific research of the time to explain why women were not more prevalent as composers. They used the evidence of biological differences between men and women to "explain" that women were not physically or emotionally capable of composing "great" music. In an article published in 1880 George Upton wrote that because woman’s emotions dominate her and she is governed by intuition rather than logic she is unable to "bind, measure and limit" her emotions within the rigid laws of harmony and counterpoint. He also believed that the feminine character is unable to endure the discouragements, prejudice and indifference that composers must inevitably experience. He claimed that women have not succeeded as composers despite having the opportunity. Upton concluded that "it does not seem that woman [sic] will ever originate music in its fullest and grandest harmonic forms. She will

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always be the recipient and interpreter, but there is little hope she will be the creator." 22 H. R. Haweis came to the same conclusion, stating that, "woman's temperament is naturally artistic, not in a creative, but in a receptive sense. A woman seldom writes good music, and never great music." 23 The author of an article titled "Women as Composers" in the Musical Times in 1887 argued that women are not capable of abstract thought. 24 Women who did compose were frowned upon. In 1920 an article by J. Swinburne entitled "Women and Music" published in the proceedings of the Royal Musical Association states that a women's mind is receptive, not creative and that a woman who goes beyond the acceptable feminine sphere "insults her own sex." 25

The social climate changed little in the 1920s and 1930s in England. The ideology of the time celebrated motherhood and family life and the private sphere for women re-emerged as the ideal. British sexologists claimed that biological factors determined the differences between masculinity and femininity, which served to reinforce ideas of proper roles for women and traditional beliefs about women's innate domesticity. 26 There was a powerful reaction against feminism and feminists; women who chose to work and those who did not have children were branded, "a menace to civilisation. They provoke sex misunderstanding and antagonism." 27 Such arguments, providing theories based on biological determinism against women as creators, attempted to restrict women to the domestic sphere.

Smyth's response to such arguments was to challenge the assumptions about women's abilities and to examine the social conditions for women musicians. Her first public response was made in a letter to The Times in October 1913:

People often ask, Where are the great women composers? I wonder how many great male composers there would be if men had been completely shut out from the workaday world of art, deprived of the bracing, the concentration, the comradeship — in a word, the inestimable training and stimulus of professional life. 28

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27 Cited in Kent. "Gender Reconstruction.": 74.
28 The Times (London) October 21 1913: 12.
Other women composers of Smyth’s lifetime also expressed opinions on gender in music. When the views of Clara Schumann (1819-96) and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-47) are compared with their colleagues of the following generation it is clear that attitudes, particularly amongst women composers, were changing. Helen J. Clarke also wrote, in 1895, of the limited educational opportunities for women in music.²⁹ Luise Adolpha Le Beau (1850-1927) was encouraged by her father to publish her autobiography in 1910 to speak out on the discrimination facing women. Le Beau wrote that the limited educational opportunities for women, and the prejudice they faced, accounted in part for the position of women composers.³⁰ A number of other women musicians (including Mabel Daniels, Nadia Boulanger and Amy Fay) dealt with the issue of being labelled a “woman composer” and spoke out about their battle against prejudices towards creative women.³¹ Cecile Chaminade was also well aware of the gender issues and recognised societal restrictions placed on women.³²

The “great women composers” issue was just the starting point for Smyth’s essays. Having raised the issue of the lack of women composers in the past Smyth concerned herself with whether women were capable of achieving on a level equal to that of men in other avenues of life. She focused on exceptional women in history to demonstrate that women are capable of “greatness” in science, literature, religion, and politics and to dispel the belief held by many that women could not achieve such status. She cited the names of famous women in history such as Florence Nightingale, Rosa Bonheur, Emmeline Pankhurst, Joan of Arc, and women monarchs and saints and noted that “there is evidence enough in history that the feminine brain, heart, intuitive power, etc., make up something that should be of value in life.”³³ However, she observed that “only a small proportion of women have occupied positions in which men could afford to give them a free hand without loss of dignity to themselves; yet among these the percentage of great personalities has been very high.”³⁴ This identification with a tradition of prominent women in history was also a feature of the work of mid- and late Victorian feminists, who linked themselves with women whose prominence was based on their own talents rather than marriage or family connections.³⁵

Smyth perceived that despite the presence of “great women,” attitudes in society were still turned against women. In *A Final Burning of Boats*, she used Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to demonstrate how these attitudes were responsible for the current position.

To that same smug and savage Puritanism that ‘put woman in her place’ and sealed the prison-door in the name of religion, we owe not only the disappearance of music and merriment from England, but such a stultification of woman’s brains, that when they began to use them again some 200 years later, it was with a furtive sense of acting improperly, not to mention having to brave the contempt and anger of their menfolk.36

Smyth observed that the arts had proved to be an area in which it was particularly difficult for women to achieve success and that they had historically sought ways around the prejudice inherent within the arts. She noted that many women novelists had adopted pseudonyms to publish their work.

But although the practice of literature involves no blatant conflict with men’s interest, no truculent stepping down into some public arena sacred hitherto to the male, Georges Sand, the Brontes, George Eliot, and others, thought well to adopt masculine or neutral names. And in our own day, in spite of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, the authors of the Irish R. M. and Vernon Lee have followed suit.37

Although she does not mention it in her essays, Smyth signed her works with the gender-neutral E. M. Smyth for publication and performances of her works prior to her involvement with the suffrage movement. The Mass (published 1893) and *Der Wald* (1902) were published under the name E. M. Smyth, but *Hey Nonny No* (1911), *The Boatswain’s Mate* (1915) and *The Wreckers* (1916) were published under her full name.

Smyth did not cite knowledge of a tradition of women composers, or appear to discuss networks of contemporary women composers although she knew the women working in the field and was a member of Society of Women Musicians. This was perhaps not unusual for women composers of her generation. Marcia Citron suggests that in the nineteenth century, at least, there did not appear to be, “an awareness of a female tradition…. [or] a feeling of community with female-composer contemporaries” amongst women composers.38 While this is in reference to composers of the nineteenth-century, it is equally applicable to the early twentieth century and to Smyth’s generation whose roots lay in the nineteenth

century. Smyth did not doubt women's ability to compose, as did, for example, Clara Schumann whose doubt of women's creative abilities is well known. Schumann was ambivalent about her creative work, referring to some of her own compositions as merely "women's work." She wrote in her diary in 1839: "I once believed that I had creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not wish to compose – there never was one able to do it. Am I intended to be the one? It would be arrogant to believe that."39 Edith Brower's 1894 article "Is the Musical Idea Masculine?" concluded that women were not capable of composition, writing: "that because woman as the lesser man is comparatively deficient in active emotional force, she cannot for this reason produce that which, at its best, is the highest and strongest of all modes of emotional expression."40 Others denied that it was anything to do with women's inability to compose but rather a lack of opportunities. Cecile Chaminade remarked:

"I do not believe that the few women who have achieved greatness in creative work are the exception, but I think that life has been hard on women; it has not given them opportunity; it has not made them convincing.... She has been handicapped, and only the few, through force of circumstances or inherent strength, have been able to get the better of that handicap.41

Regarding the position of women musicians Smyth stated that, "as things are today it is absolutely impossible in this country for a woman composer to get and to keep her head above water; to go on from strength to strength, and develop such power as she may possess."42 She identified the reasons as a deficit in education, training and professional opportunities, and the position of women in orchestras. To demonstrate this Smyth focused on the position of women instrumentalists, historically and contemporaneously. She observed that the situation for women changed considerably from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Whereas formal training had once been off-limits for women, gradually training on all orchestral instruments became available at the music colleges.

By and by, students at our musical colleges began clamouring to learn stringed instruments, and presently half the string band consisted of girls. Later on the mouthpiece of certain wind instruments was permitted

to insert itself between feminine lips, and, to cut a long story short, today [1933] there is not an instrument in the orchestra that is not taught to female musical students.... I cannot remember at what exact moment this important new move in our training was inaugurated, though of course the war interrupted it.43

Her main point on the issue of training for women was summed up in the statement:

that because of what has been our position hitherto in the world of music, there is not at this present moment (1933) one single middle-aged woman alive who has had the musical education that has fallen to men as a matter of course, without any effort on their part, ever since music was!44

Smyth’s analysis of the situation for women’s access to training, although lacking in evidential proof, can now be seen to have been essentially accurate. During the nineteenth century the European conservatories accepted women but their education was, “separate and not equal to that of the male students.”45 The work of Nancy Reich, Carol Neuls-Bates and others has revealed that women were excluded from the conservatoires in England and Europe, or limited to particular classes and a lesser depth of study. At the Paris Conservatoire, for example, women were not permitted to study written harmony until 1879 and composition, counterpoint and score-reading were often off-limits to women.46 Mabel Daniels had to challenge the prejudice against women musicians to be allowed to study score-reading at the Munich Conservatory in 1902, and she noted that until 1897, “anything more than advanced harmony was debarred. The ability of the feminine intellect to comprehend the intricacies of a stretto, or cope with double counterpoint in the tenth, if not openly denied, was severely questioned.”47 Opportunities for women graduates of the colleges were extremely limited. Many of those who did maintain a professional career faced prejudice and difficulties due to their gender.

Women did gradually gain access to all orchestral instruments with the rise of training colleges. Initially, only the harp or piano were considered suitable instruments for women to study but by the late nineteenth century increasing numbers of women were studying the violin. The numbers of women taking up the

violin in the latter part of the century caused controversy. Many of the conservatories in the nineteenth century did not allow women to participate in the orchestra classes, and wind instruments were considered unsuitable for women. Nineteenth-century attitudes to women players in the orchestra were demonstrated in a letter to Joseph Joachim, director of the Berlin Hochschule for Music.

[Women] add nothing to the orchestra performances; indeed, I am more and more convinced by the last few rehearsals that the weak and uncertain playing of the young girls not only does no good at all but actually makes the sound indistinct and out of tune.... They should not be trained to become orchestra players as such anyway. It is bad enough that women are meddling in every possible place where they don't belong.... At the very least, we have to make sure that orchestras will not have men and women playing together in the future.  

The Czech violinist Wilma Neruda made the violin a popular instrument for women in England from the time of her regular performances in London in the late 1860s. In a performance at the Royal College of Music in 1893 thirty-four out of a total of fifty string players were women. Over the next twenty years the instruments available to women at the colleges increased: the orchestra at a concert at the Royal Academy of Music in 1912 consisted of eighty-eight players, forty-nine of whom were women performing on all instruments except brass and percussion. Increasing numbers of women violinists worked in London at the turn of the century. “Between 1900 and 1910 the number of women players listed in the [annual Musical] directory increased from 132 to 166; more than 16 percent of the total number of violinists.”

Smyth was not alone in her belief that the reason why women had not become composers was due to lack of education and opportunities. Helen Clarke made a similar remark, commenting that, “until women have had the same sort of training, above all, the same musical environments, the same opportunity to devote themselves body and soul to the art of composition, it is manifestly unfair to declare them mentally and emotionally incapable of great work.” Clarke, writing in response to Edith Brower’s article, noted that the position of women in music was largely attributable to their lack of training, not to any “innate inferiority of mind or heart, of intellect or emotion.” Clarke noted that men have, “always

50 Hyde. New-Found Voices: 40.
breathed in the midst of musical environments," while women, however, have historically been denied access to the institutions in which men gained their training.\textsuperscript{54} Writing in 1878 Luise Adolphe Le Beau identified the "incomplete, often too late education of women" as the chief cause for the lower standard of women musicians. She urged that the musical education of girls be the same as boys.\textsuperscript{55}

The point that Smyth wished to emphasise was that while women had equal access to education in the 1920s and 1930s the limitations shifted from access to education to restrictions in post-educational opportunities.

But in order to master music as a trade more than that [training] is necessary; you have to be right down in the rough and tumble of music life, and no sooner did a woman leave college than she became aware of men's firm intention to keep her out of [the] arena.\textsuperscript{56}

She claimed that the limitations placed on women graduates were such that they could make a living from teaching children or performing in "hotels and restaurants [playing] jazz and sob-stuff" but were prevented from joining the first-class orchestras.\textsuperscript{57} She argued that this was the most severe limitation on women since, "orchestral playing is the finest training a young composer can have,"\textsuperscript{58} and is "one of the main entrances to that delectable land of rough and tumble" of musical life.\textsuperscript{59}

Her belief in the orchestra being the best training ground for musicians is based on her perception of what the orchestra offers, which she argued applied to both performers and composers.

There's education for you!... All the best music, ancient and modern, passes in procession across your desk; here as nowhere else can you learn instrumentation, phrasing, conducting, rhythm.... As regards material issues, you command a good salary, and get innumerable chances of engagements at Chamber Concerts and private houses.... Finally, as member of a first-class orchestra you can ask good fees for giving lessons.\textsuperscript{60}

Smyth saw all of these aspects of professional music as essential for bringing women into the musical scene on equal terms to men. She used orchestral playing as an example of the importance of women becoming part of the "rough and

\textsuperscript{55} Cited in Olson. "Luise Adolpha Le Beau.": 297-98.
\textsuperscript{56} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 8. Italics in original.
\textsuperscript{57} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 8.
\textsuperscript{58} Smyth. \textit{Streaks of Life}: 241.
\textsuperscript{59} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 8.
\textsuperscript{60} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 8-9.
tumble of musical life as men are [because until then] there cannot possibly be many women composers worth talking about.”

One possible alternative to women joining the mainstream professional orchestras – “women’s orchestras” – was not an ideal solution for Smyth.

Various brilliant creatures propose men’s orchestras and women’s orchestras. Quite so. Why not picture galleries, dinner parties, and anything else on the same cheerful and natural lines? Why not break up the world into monasteries and convents?

She was aware that integration on equal terms was crucial and recognised that allowing the segregation into women’s orchestras would merely result in those orchestras becoming second rate and would further hinder women from becoming fully integrated in musical life. Smyth was well aware of the patronising attitude towards “ladies orchestras” in the late nineteenth century.

As for the professional female orchestral player, the idea of such a being had hardly risen above the horizon in the early years of this century; and I well remember that no one looked on Lady Folkestone’s String Band of women-amateurs as an outlet for serious musical energy and passion, but merely as an aristocratic fad; a resource for such bored and elegant ones as today eke out the hours with feeble bridge.

In fact, Viscountess Folkestone’s (Lady Radnor) string orchestra, which raised funds for the foundation of the Royal College of Music in 1882, gained some good reviews. Scholes remarked that the orchestra, consisting of seventy-two string players in 1894, “had a good run of life and won the high regard of the musical public.” Parry wrote a work for the orchestra, Lady Radnor’s Suite, and the Musical Times noted in the review: “the inferior standard of criticism generally applied to amateur orchestras can in their case be put aside.” The review also praised Lady Radnor as “a conductor of quite exceptional qualifications who evidently exercises the indefinable influence over her players which distinguishes the conductor ‘born, not made.’” However, women’s orchestras were not always taken seriously and were at best treated with curiosity by critics. They were seen as a novelty, with reviews of concerts maintaining an amused or patronising tone often describing the physical appearance of the performers. In general they were not given equal treatment and many, including Smyth, believed that access to professional

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orchestras was essential if women were to become fully respected as professional performers.

The position of women in the professional orchestras was one of Smyth’s recurring themes throughout her essays and she pointed to the cases of various professional orchestras in London and their policies on women players. There was considerable debate in the early twentieth century on whether women should have access to the professional orchestras. Opponents argued that women were not physically capable of performing, suggesting that the “power of tone is always lacking” as was “firmness of attack.” Opponents argued that women were not physically capable of performing, suggesting that the “power of tone is always lacking” as was “firmness of attack.”66 They also argued on economic and moral grounds, that women would occupy jobs previously held by men and that a woman’s proper role was as a mother and home maker.

Henry Wood was one of the first to employ women in his orchestra. Smyth noted that it was Wood, “who first started mixed bathing in the sea of music, and so successful was the innovation than many other orchestras followed suit.”67 Smyth described this “task of breaking down the cruel man-erected barrier between us and orchestral playing” as “an act of moral courage for which we can never be grateful enough.” In 1913, encouraged by Belgian violinist and conductor Eugène Ysaÿe (1858-1931) who employed women in his orchestra in Brussels, Wood hired six women string players. He described the event in his autobiography:

> Each year the number of women who presented themselves [for the annual auditions] proved a problem. For some years many of these had equalled or even surpassed the men players until I felt it was unfair that they should study and gain such musicianship, only to slide back into a necessarily disappointed existence.69

He received 137 applications for six vacancies, and the women were paid the same rate as the men. When the BBC Symphony Orchestra was established in 1930 the orchestra also included women performers on the violin, viola and harp. From the records it appears there were eighteen women players in October 1930.70

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68 Smyth. *Female Pipeings in Eden: 9.*
70 Nicholas Kenyon. *The BBC Symphony Orchestra 1930-1980.* London: BBC, 1981. 441-446. I derived this figure from Appendix A “Personalia” which is a table “of all players listed in the BBC records as contracted to the Orchestra during its first fifty years.” The list gives the contract start date (20 July 1930) for the 114 original players, listed by surname and first name. The eighteen names of women performers identified as having contracts starting on this date corresponds with the publicity photograph of the Orchestra immediately prior to the start of the 1930 season. There were ten violinists, six viola players and two women harpists. Women players are not discussed in the text of the book, apart from Kenyon’s brief comment regarding the establishment of the orchestra: “There was a good proportion of women: how ridiculous all the scaremongering in the press about the exclusion of women had been!” [page 55.]
Smyth observed that there were particular instruments that women were allowed to play; all-male orchestras such as the London Symphony Orchestra conceded a woman player on the harp, and the BBC orchestra, while allowing women violin, viola and harp players, did not allow women cellists. "Perhaps the attitude of the 'cello player is considered an unseemly one for women?" She also noted that during the war women were admitted to the orchestras to replace men but that "since the war the female taboo in orchestras has fluctuated like the money market and exhibits equally baffling features." Smyth examined the case of the Hallé Orchestra in particular, which had sacked its women players in 1920, "not in order to make way for fighting men whose places they had been occupying - no woman that breathes but gives way gladly in such case - but merely because of their sex!" The orchestra cited two reasons for this: firstly that it was not always easy to find suitable accommodation when on tour for the women players (despite, Smyth noted, theatre companies having no difficulties), and secondly in the interests of "unity of style." Smyth claimed that the question of "unity of style" cannot apply to the performance style of an orchestra.

You can talk of unity of style between static things, such as Italian violins, verses of a poem, houses in a street, bank clerks, priests, etc., but not in the case of a fluid force. Sex will not give it to 40 men of different talent, temperament, habit, digestions and schools; that is the conductor’s office.

In demonstrating the difficulties for women instrumentalists and looking at training opportunities and access to professional orchestras, Smyth became a spokesperson for many contemporary women musicians. Although she stated her claims anecdotally and from personal experience they have been since validated by feminist research. She also recognised that the difficulties facing women musicians were greater than the issue of equal opportunities, and she consequently examined the prejudices and discrimination women face in music; prejudice that she accounts for as both unintentional or "natural," and also that which is deliberate.

Her underlying premise was two-fold; that on the one hand men suffer from "sex jealousy, the feeling that creeps into men’s hearts when they see women invading what have hitherto been male preserves" and as a result "cling to their monopolies." On the other hand a "male reluctance to recognise distinction in our

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73 Smyth. Streaks of Life: 222.
74 Smyth. Streaks of Life: 223.
75 Smyth. A Final Burning of Boats: 14
sex” has resulted in seemingly deliberate efforts to keep women out of professional music.\textsuperscript{77} She described this “anti-social combine [sic] to keep women out of the running as long as possible”\textsuperscript{78} as, “the determining factor in the position of Women in Music.”\textsuperscript{79}

Of the first issue, sex jealousy, Smyth stated that, “the chief difficulty women musicians have to face is that in no walk of life do men like to see us come barging in on their preserves.”\textsuperscript{80} Women find themselves “confronted with a barrier of prejudice and ill-will.”\textsuperscript{81} She did not blame men for clinging to their monopolies but pointed out that, “men are in a better position for practising collective selfishness than women.”\textsuperscript{82} This resulted in attempts to keep women out of professional music life by denying access to training and professional opportunities.

Smyth’s observations of sexual prejudice in music were not isolated. Luise Adolpha Le Beau also wrote of the prejudice she experienced as a woman composer working in Germany in the late nineteenth-century. In many respects her career echoes that of Smyth’s. She experienced similar problems as a woman who was determined to establish a professional career through the composition of large-scale works. She was accepted as a teacher and performer, although she was prevented from holding an academic post as a teacher. She experienced difficulties in getting her opera performed in Germany, despite having published the score herself. Le Beau was often denied recognition because it was felt inappropriate to award honours to a woman.\textsuperscript{83}

Smyth believed there was a “male reluctance to recognise distinction in our sex” which contributed to the inferior position of women in the arts. She stated her belief that men have not acknowledged women’s work or contributions to history, who have thus been omitted from history books. Women had also been relegated to lower status by, for example, using the label “lady composer” or “women’s work” when reviewing the music, effectively diminishing or discrediting their work. The effect on the position of women musicians, of denying or diminishing women’s work, was enormous and, she believed, deliberate: “I, for one, really cannot believe that the organised exclusion of women from this or that branch of activity has been brought about by males in a state of coma.”\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 8.
  \item Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 6.
  \item Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 21.
  \item Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 20.
  \item Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 7.
  \item Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 6.
  \item Olson. “Luise Adolpha Le Beau.”: 287-8, 290.
  \item Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 14-15.
\end{itemize}
Smyth had first-hand evidence of the attitudes of some male musicians to female composers and their reluctance to recognise distinction. In 1939 she wrote to Bruno Walter, by now a good friend, asking of his memories of their first meeting in 1906. Walter replied: "I remember – as I could not think of an English lady as a ‘real’ composer – to have expected an embarrassing situation." Walter immediately became aware of his mistaken prejudice and throughout his career expressed his admiration for her music. However, Smyth recognised that reactions and attitudes such as this were prevalent in society.

Within patriarchal social structures of this period, the significance of women’s music was undermined. Smyth cited a case from her own experience that demonstrated the difficulties a woman composer might experience regarding large-scale compositions.

As for myself, in very early days I guessed that it takes a male of genius to ‘perceive’ a woman’s music at all. Between him and it, the reflection ‘there has never been a great woman composer, and there never will be,’ rises up like a wall..... In 1891 I showed my Mass to Hermann Levi, the great Wagner conductor, and met his ejaculation, ‘Never, never could I have believed that a woman wrote that!’ with ‘No! and what’s more, in a week’s time you won’t believe it!.... When I made that remark, Levi, who was as honest as he was wise, stared at me and said slowly, ‘I believe you are right!’

Smyth cited three specific cases of exclusion of women from history. She noted that she herself was excluded from a book on “English Opera,” despite having had five operas produced in England since 1900, and despite being known to the author. She also noted that Dorothy Howell, composer and then a Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, was not mentioned in the third edition of *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians* published in 1927, and suggested it was unlikely that she would be mentioned in future editions. Citing the case of a woman artist, she observed that Mrs [Annie Louis] Swynnerton was only belatedly made an Associate Member of the Royal Academy of Art (in 1922) and Laura Knight was

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87 Smyth. *A Final Burning of Boats*: 37-38. Smyth claims she was surprised at not receiving a copy of the book when it was published, “as his brother is a good friend of mine.” I have not been able to identify this book. St John does not name the book or the author, but refers to it as a “comprehensive history of English opera.” St John. *Ethel Smyth*: 190. She implies that the book Smyth referred to was not Cecil Gray’s book, although Smyth was not mentioned in his book. [Gray, Cecil. *A Survey of Contemporary Music*. London: Oxford University Press, 1924/R1928.]
often not on lists of contemporary artists.\textsuperscript{89} She noted that the omission of such women perpetuated the idea that they are not capable of achieving success.

As much as she hated the idea of segregated orchestras, Smyth detested the use of the "lady composer label" which she thought was assigned to her and other women composers to pigeon-hole their work and cast them to one side. She remarked that she was not, "a composer among composers, but a 'lady composer'" and that, "for years my music was never mentioned without reference to some plagiarised victim." She acknowledged the effect of, "the two fatal words relegating me to the ranks of the negligible."\textsuperscript{90} She claimed that in applying the label of "lady composer" women's work could be ignored, by concluding that "woman is merely an imitative being, incapable of strong original work and therefore unfit to enter the lists and run side by side with yourselves [male colleagues]."\textsuperscript{91} She observed also a "temptation to pretend that women are non-existent musically,"\textsuperscript{92} and a "subconscious \textit{a priori} inclination not to think very highly of a woman's work."\textsuperscript{93}

Nadia Boulanger also spoke on this subject. She was always very careful regarding her position as a woman in the male-dominated field of composing and conducting. Early in her career she assented to "serve as a feminist symbol."\textsuperscript{94} However, by the 1930s she was determined that her gender would not play a significant role in assessing her work. On tour in the United States in 1938 she was asked by journalists what it was like to be the first woman to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She replied: "I've been a woman for a little over 50 years and have gotten over my initial astonishment. As for conducting an orchestra, that's a job. I don't think sex plays much part."\textsuperscript{95} During her tour the following year she was frequently asked for her perspective as a woman on many subjects and would reply, "Let's forget I happen to be a woman, and talk about music."\textsuperscript{96}

The terms "feminine" and "women's work," whether used to describe work by men or women, appeared to Smyth to be used derogatorily. She saw that women were faced with the double bind of being accused of "feminine irresponsibility" or of "strength we do not expect to find in a woman's work."\textsuperscript{97} She remarked also that the press react very differently to works by men and women and that this impacts on the composer's future.

\textsuperscript{89} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 3, 10.
\textsuperscript{90} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 23-24.
\textsuperscript{91} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 49.
\textsuperscript{92} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 38.
\textsuperscript{93} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 25.
\textsuperscript{95} Rosenstiel. \textit{Nadia Boulanger}: 292.
\textsuperscript{96} Rosenstiel. \textit{Nadia Boulanger}: 303-4.
\textsuperscript{97} Smyth. \textit{Streaks of Life}: 226.
If you are going with the stream, as men do, and barge up against an obstacle, very often the impact will shoot you right out into the current and actually help you on your way. But if you are swimming against the stream, which is the privilege of the female, such an impact can but send you spinning back ... back ... yards and yards in the wrong direction.¹⁰⁸

The patronising tone that Smyth noticed in connection with women composers was outdated, she claimed, and did not remain in other avenues of life. "I do beg of them ... to try and get rid of a certain note of patronage as regards women, in matters artistic, that has been abandoned in other fields as no longer rhyming with the facts of modern life."⁹⁹ She noted that women were making advances in many other aspects of life and commented: "Why then ... go on assuming, as you had some right to do thirty or forty years ago, that whenever a woman's music is in question, a little splashing about with a paste brush and a packet of 'lady composer' labels will meet the case?"¹⁰⁰

Smyth recognised a "colleague element" in effect amongst male musicians which ensured that a man would always give the job to another man. She claimed that a conversation with a male conductor confirmed her suspicions about this when he admitted that:

'between a man and woman player of equal capacity,' he said, 'I should unhesitatingly choose the man!' And if I had expressed to him my private conviction that the majority of conductors would rather produce a boring piece of male music than score a resounding success with a work by a woman, I believe that truth-loving man would have said 'Yes! that is so!' This sort of thing does not simplify a woman's journey towards a musical goal!¹⁰¹

Le Beau also identified the "colleague element" as a difficulty in her own career. She recognised that because of her gender she failed to gain honours or academic positions. This was despite knowing men with such posts who were inferior to her in musical ability. Regarding one such opportunity denied to her she wrote, "I could more than fulfil the stipulations regarding compositions to be submitted.... The question was only whether this title could be conferred on a woman at all."¹⁰²

Smyth wrote of the negative effects of ignoring women's work, whether or not deliberate. She argued that if women composers were denied all chances to have works performed it would be almost impossible for them as a group to make any advances. Her argument was that it is impossible to get "giants like Mt. Blanc and

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¹⁰⁰ Smyth. A Final Burning of Boats: 49.
¹⁰¹ Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 25.
¹⁰² Cited in Olson. "Luise Adolpha Le Beau.": 288.
Mt. Everest without the mass of moderate-sized mountains on whose shoulders they stand. It is the upbuilding of this platform that is impossible so long as full music life is denied to women."\textsuperscript{103} The lack of a tradition and role models accounts for there being no "great women composers." She argued that unless women's music was given an opportunity, and individual women composers given training and performances, there would be no way of building up this tradition. She remarked on the "extreme isolation of the woman composer" and the difficulties an individual composer faces in trying to establish a career when there is neither tradition nor role models.\textsuperscript{104}

A fact no one seems to realise is, that until about twenty years ago, excluded from the rough and tumble of music life where composers and conductors pick up half their experience and God knows how much stimulus, it was as impossible for a woman to become a great composer as to become a great mariner.... It is chiefly because the evolution of the woman as composer is so interesting and important that I am so desperately keen on her being freely admitted into first-class orchestras, and every department of musical life.\textsuperscript{105}

Feminist musicologists have argued that the lack of support for women composers, their isolation, and the tendency for them not to be a part of the networks (of male composers at the time) has had a negative effect on the careers of most women composers. Olson writes of Le Beau:

She cites [in her autobiography] the misunderstanding of her talent as the primary reason for her increasing withdrawal from the musical community. This withdrawal was not only from active involvement in the musical life of the various cities in which she lived, but also from the stimulation of the works of her younger contemporaries.... Thus Le Beau did not truly give herself the chance to fulfil her potential.\textsuperscript{106}

Marcia Citron noted a similar position with regards to Cecile Chaminade. She argued that her isolation from the centres of musical power meant that she remained on the periphery of the musical world. In her case her father did not allow her to study at the Paris Conservatoire, hence she was denied interaction with the other students.\textsuperscript{107}

Ethel Smyth's arguments on the practical issues facing women in music in early twentieth century England demonstrate she portrayed the situation for many women composers in her writings. Although she relied extensively on

\textsuperscript{103} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 31.
\textsuperscript{104} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 29.
\textsuperscript{105} Smyth. \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 20-21.
\textsuperscript{106} Olson. "Luise Adolpha Le Beau": 298.
autobiography to argue her case, and was criticised for doing so, her arguments have been supported by other writers of the period and by modern research. Smyth was one of a few women to write openly and extensively on the subject and the significance of her writings, although overlooked during her lifetime, becomes apparent when her theories are compared with contemporary feminist musicology.
Smyth’s theories in her essays on women in music concerning difference, a woman’s voice in composition, and how this affected women’s position in the musical establishment reflected feminist thought of the period. She was acquainted with many of the prominent feminists and was herself a contributor to the leading feminist journal, *Time and Tide*. She was undoubtedly influenced by many of these writers and her own essays take up the arguments in feminist debate at the time.\(^1\)

The underlying issue of feminism in the 1920s was whether it should be based on sexual difference or the elimination of gender distinctions.\(^2\) There was considerable debate amongst feminists in the post-war period about the approach feminism should take: a demand for equality on the same terms as men, or working towards a full recognition of the different needs of women. This debate amongst the “old” equal rights feminists and the “new” feminists who believed in the importance of the differences between the sexes, although not an entirely new issue, dominated feminist theory during the 1920s and 1930s.

Smyth’s feminist beliefs combined elements of both sides of the debate. The equal rights arguments led her to fight for access to professional status for women musicians and to fight against discrimination based on gender. Her arguments, minimising any distinction between the abilities or needs of men and women, reflected the arguments of the Women’s Social and Political Union (which introduced Smyth to political feminism) and the “old” feminism arguments of the 1920s. But Smyth also believed in “difference” and subscribed to the feminist arguments of the time that emphasised difference as an important step in acknowledging women’s contribution in society. She believed this resulted in a

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1 Smyth knew Winifred Holtby and was influenced directly by Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Popular arguments of the period put forward by writers such as Rebecca West, Elizabeth Robins, and Holtby appear to be taken up in Smyth’s essays.

different voice in creative work by women. This essentialist view acknowledged that differences would manifest themselves in the music world as prejudice against women’s creative work. This was seen to impact upon the ability of women composers to have their music accepted into the mainstream of performed works. Smyth examined these ideas in her essays. She established an idea of a woman’s voice in composition and suggested that men could not understand this different voice and as a consequence tended to ignore or dismiss the work of women composers. She examined the consequences of writing with a different voice for women gaining access to the musical establishment, and critiqued the roles and functions of the establishment. Smyth believed that the different contributions made by men and women were equally important and expressed her hope that in the future music by women composers would be respected on equal terms.

Ideas of sexual difference were prevalent during the 1920s and 1930s and stem from the previous century. Mid-Victorian feminism exalted the qualities of womanhood and promoted ideas of women’s morality and nurturance, with an assertion of intelligence, independence and personal strength. Women were seen as more innately chaste, compassionate, virtuous and dutiful. These ideas were used by feminists fighting for greater equality to promote the idea that women should be entitled to a larger public role. The belief in sexual difference continued into the twentieth century, but during the 1920s and 1930s there was much debate amongst feminists as to the importance placed on difference. Two schools of thought emerged. “New” feminism (“social” or “maternal” feminism) promoted the idea of sexual difference and, “accepted without question that biological difference and different familial roles led to different interests, needs, and outlooks for men and women.” Eleanor Rathbone, president of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship and one of the main advocates of “new” feminism, wrote in 1926: “We can demand what we want for women, not because it is what men have got, but because it is what women need to fulfil the potentialities of their own nature.” Supporters of “old” feminism (sometimes referred to as “equal rights” or “equality” feminism) believed that while sex differentiation was important, its influence was overestimated. They insisted that men and women are fundamentally similar and continued the fight for equal rights, in particular, political equality. They were concerned that the beliefs of “new” feminism, “constituted an acceptance of a world where gender differences were emphasised.

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5 Cited in Caine. *English Feminism*: 188.
to the detriment of freedom and equal opportunities for women” and would make it harder for women to escape from traditional roles.

There were negative aspects to both feminist arguments. Harold Smith, in summarising the debates, concluded:

Equality feminists needed to stimulate women’s awareness of gender inequality in order to mobilize them to work for equality, but in emphasizing what women lacked in comparison to men they seemed to be encouraging a negative image of women’s self worth. Part of the new feminist appeal stemmed from its avoidance of this pitfall. By stressing the positive feminine qualities men lacked, new feminists encouraged women to take pride in their femaleness but in doing so they weakened women’s sense of acute injustice.

By combining elements of “new” and “old” feminism Smyth circumvented the pitfalls and utilised the best aspects of each approach. This was not uncommon amongst feminists. Many equality feminists accepted social feminist arguments. Naomi Black noted that, “even the militant suffragettes, the members of the Pankhursts’ Women’s Social and Political Union, believed in the distinctiveness and superiority of women’s values and capabilities.” In combining aspects of both feminisms – arguing for equality based on the importance of the specific qualities women have to offer, for example – Smyth was neither alone nor arbitrary in her theories.

Smyth’s essays on women in music demonstrate the manner in which she embraced the feminist arguments of the 1920s and 1930s. While Smyth used theories of equality to argue for women’s admission to education and professional opportunities, she turned to theories of difference to analyse the relationship between gender and composition. She believed that the male and female brains are “differently constructed” and that women’s “mentality is different from that of men.” Women were:

more capable of enthusiasm and devotion, readier to spend and be spent emotionally than men.... Their nerves, too, seem nearer the surface, more responsive to appeal, less deeply buried under that habitual resistance to the emotional appeal.

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Her belief in difference and her view of this as a source of identity enabled her to suggest that since women and men's brains are "differently constructed," women might therefore compose with a different "voice." She believed that given time, a woman's voice in music composition would express itself. She compared the situation for women composers with that of women writers and noted that, "few deny that the Brontes and Jane Austen brought a new note into our literature," and that once women composers had the opportunity for the "liberation of [their] creative spirit" it could be possible to detect a "new note" in music also.\textsuperscript{13}

She identified several features from the work of women writers and composers that she believed characterised a woman's voice: "volcanic" or "immense energy," "directness of methods" and greater "inward freedom." Women are "less conventional" than men, which in music, she believed, expresses itself as being not afraid of using melody, a trait she identified in particular in women song writers.\textsuperscript{14} However, she observed that many factors influenced women's creative voice. She recognised that women's different history has had an effect on their current position in society and that this may have impacted upon their creativity.

That men have been on the top of the wave since time was, whereas we are still fighting our way upwards from the bottom of the sea, is a fact that will surely set an eternal stamp on our destiny as does the difference of sex.\textsuperscript{15}

She believed that women should not be thinking of competing with men, but of "creating something different."\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps, she suggested, women are not yet writing with their own voice and the "great business is to find out what we ourselves think and feel ... and try to say exactly that."\textsuperscript{17} She wrote of certain "qualities" and of something "unvoiced" in women's creative spirit, that will express itself in "a language different" to men.\textsuperscript{18}

But perhaps what women are called upon to pass on, that quality I spoke of, cannot be found on the road up and down which every one is tearing; perhaps it lies at the bottom of the sea, where we are at home; and perhaps our fate, not an ignoble one, is to bring it up to the surface....

\textsuperscript{13} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 9-10.
\textsuperscript{15} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 53.
\textsuperscript{16} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 53.
\textsuperscript{17} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 54.
\textsuperscript{18} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 55.
have always felt it must be, for women, a question of something yet unvoiced\textsuperscript{19}

Smyth’s theory may have been influenced by an article by Bruno Walter, originally published in an Austrian music journal and reprinted in \textit{The Times} in 1912. Walter wrote on Smyth’s status in music, remarking that he believed she was “a composer of quite special significance.” He continued on the subject of her gender and the possibility of a female voice in composition:

Real musical productivity is so rare, that we are entitled to ask whether the impression of originality created by these compositions is not attributable to their femininity? Our ears are trained immediately to detect national differences in music, but are too inexperienced to detect sex characteristics. If we had a hundred female composers we might be able to establish a distinction between male and female music. I am, however, convinced that Dr. Ethel Smyth’s thematic charm proceeds in an essential degree from her womanliness, though her work is at the same time English through and through.\textsuperscript{20}

Smyth quoted this article in \textit{A Final Burning of Boats} to support her own arguments on the possibility of a female voice in composition. The idea that women should find their own voice and seek a women’s style rather than imitate men was prevalent in feminist thought at the time. Eleanor Rathbone advocated the need for women to discover their own needs to fulfil their potentialities. Amy Fay suggested that as more women gained training they would begin to “feel out a path for themselves, instead of being mere imitators of men.”\textsuperscript{21} Virginia Woolf also believed that women’s voice in literature would, and should, be different from that of men’s voice. She wrote in \textit{A Room of One’s Own}: “It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men.... Ought not education to bring out [sic] and fortify the differences rather than the similarities?”\textsuperscript{22} Woolf stressed the importance of a women’s tradition, “for we think back through our mothers if we are women.”\textsuperscript{23} She believed that women had to find their own traditions, since, although male values prevail, they offer little to the woman writer.\textsuperscript{24} Smyth, perhaps influenced by Woolf’s comments, rewrote the story of

\textsuperscript{19} Smyth. \textit{Female Pipings in Eden}: 55.
\textsuperscript{20} “Dr Ethel Smyth’s Compositions.” In \textit{The Times} (London) December 23 1912. 9. Smyth cites a slightly abbreviated version of this article in \textit{A Final Burning of Boats}: 26-7.
\textsuperscript{22} Virginia Woolf. \textit{A Room of One’s Own}. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1945. 87.
\textsuperscript{23} Woolf. \textit{A Room of One’s Own}: 76.
\textsuperscript{24} Woolf. \textit{A Room of One’s Own}: 74-77.
Adam and Eve to explain her thoughts on a female voice, and the position of women in music.

The legend relates that one afternoon while Adam was asleep, Eve, anticipating the Great God Pan, bored some holes in a hollow reed and began to do what is called 'pick out a tune.' Thereupon Adam awoke; 'Stop that horrible noise,' he roared, adding, after a pause, 'besides which, if any one's going to make it, it's not you but me.'

Smyth's conclusion to the analogy is her vision of women's creative spirit taking hold in composition. She suggested that when women are able to discover their own voice in music they will no longer feel the need to compose in an "imitative" fashion, and will turn to their own styles.

That done, let her once more take up her hollow reed and start afresh. And if Adam should again awake and bid her stop that horrible noise, Eve need not be rude. Let her merely say dolce senza espressione: 'My dear Adam, if you don't admire my tunes I don't always admire yours. But don't threaten as you once did to make this particular horrible noise yourself, for it's my own composition and I hold the copyright. Besides which you couldn't make it yourself if you tried. Some other tune, yes. But not this.'

Smyth believed that difference and women writing with a different voice were positive things and used this as support for her belief that, "an important contribution by a woman ought to be on every field a new contribution, an element necessary to an all-round vision of things human." She wrote that, "the world needs the brains and outlook of both sexes." This was a fundamental idea of "new" feminism, but one adopted by many equality feminists also. It was argued that women's distinctive qualities were necessary to provide a balance to the qualities held by men, and it was necessary for women to hold public positions in order to "improve the defective social system." While Smyth arrived at her conclusions via the arguments of "new" feminism and a belief in the importance of acknowledging difference, the same conclusion was reached by supporters of "old" feminism. Winifred Holtby argued that emphasising difference, and consequently the special needs of women, served in fact to prevent women, "from making that contribution to the common good which is the privilege and the obligation of every

25 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 3.
28 Smyth. A Final Burning of Boats: 6
29 Black: "Virginia Woolf.". 300.
human being.” Both agreed, however, that acknowledging women’s contribution to society was the ultimate goal.

The theory of difference as a positive statement for creative women created problems, however. Smyth believed that differences between men and women meant that men are unable to understand creative work by women. She explained this by stating: “There is a bottomless cleft between man’s way of feeling and woman’s, and it comes out in their work.” She believed that men have a “natural difficulty in focusing it correctly” and suffer from, “an honest incapacity to understand what women are driving at.” Smyth claimed that when she looked at the contributions of women, “and reflect on the immense energy ... that has surged up in all remarkable women from Sappho to Gertrude Bell, it seems to me that such a spirit, expressing itself in terms of Art, may well clash with that of the male music-world of today.”

She further believed that the reaction by men to not being able to understand women’s work was to dismiss it or ignore it. She used the contemporary term “sex antagonism” to describe the situation for women composers.

Sex antagonism ... is an inevitable result of fundamental divergencies in our respective souls, and the consequence may well be that the Faculty honestly dislikes the work of ‘Mrs. Dr. Fell.’ The reason why [,] they ‘cannot tell,’ perhaps, but there it is; and be sure they will not state the matter to themselves in terms favourable to the other sex.35

“Sex antagonism” was a commonly used term by feminists in the 1920s when discussing contemporary relations between men and women. It referred to the perceived male refusal to share power with women, resulting in part from the competition for jobs in the post-war climate, and was believed to be one of the reasons behind women being excluded from jobs or being paid less when they did succeed in gaining employment. Elizabeth Robins believed it was rooted in “the contempt with which men’s view of women was deeply imbued.” Rebecca West identified one of the consequences of sex antagonism as, “a tendency on the part of

33 Smyth. Female Piping in Eden: 25.
34 Smyth. A Final Burning of Boats: 12.
36 Spender. Time and Tide Wait for No Man: 43, 90.
men to go and see what women are doing and tell them not to.”38 Smyth adopted the term and applied it to the situation in the arts. She believed that the situation arose out of fundamental differences between men and women, and that the differences as expressed in creative work further exacerbated the situation for women.

Like other feminists of the period, Smyth refused to accept that the problem or the responsibility for the solution to the situation lay entirely with women.39 She suggested that instead of looking at the problem from the perspective of women’s creative style being at fault, she provocatively proposed that the problem may be with men.

What if all this restiveness against woman’s spirit indicates a certain deficiency in men ... I mean a certain spiritual impotence that cuts these men off from healthy intercourse with the other sex, and limits them to the solitary pleasure of commune with their own spirit?40

Regardless of these differences and who may be “at fault” she believed that both voices were equally important.

Perhaps what men want is a banana, and woman’s soul is possibly more like a grape fruit or an orange, and sets their teeth on edge. But is that the fault of the fruit or of the teeth? In any case ... that soul can no longer be ignored or squashed, on the contrary [it] is an ingredient bound to flavour every dish at the banquet of life of an ever-increasing extent.41

Smyth stressed that this inability and reluctance to recognise women’s creative spirit is mainly a problem with the “Faculty” which unfortunately controls what is performed. When a work does make it to the public arena, at least there, the public are mixed: “half the people present are women, predisposed by nature to understand woman’s talk.”42

The issue of the “Faculty” was an important concept in Smyth’s theory. She saw a combination of structures in England’s music society that operated to determine which compositions would be performed and would therefore succeed

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39 Rebecca West also suggested that the many of the “problems” of sex antagonism were the responsibility of men. She wrote in 1924, “I believe women know how to work with men. But I believe that it is the rarest thing in the world for a man to know how to work with women without giving way to an inclination to savage his fellow-workers of the protected sex.” Time and Tide October 31 1924. Cited in Spender. Time and Tide Wait for No Man: 58.
42 Smyth. A Final Burning of Boats: 20. She also referred to the public as “that bisexual crowd.” A Final Burning of Boats: 44.
into the mainstream of performed works. These structures functioned to control the production and performance of music in England and were related both to the practicalities and ideologies of music production.

In her article on the situation of opera in England, “The Opera Fiasco” in Streaks of Life, Smyth used the term “the Machine” to describe the “business complex ... of public interest, middlemen, and other conditions” that make up the mechanics of opera production in a country. Composers are completely dependent on “the Machine” which includes copyists, publishers, training schools, conductors, opera houses and reviewers, for getting their works performed. “The Machine” can work in favour of the composer, ensuring publication, repeat performances and the right publicity to ensure that the work stays in the repertoire until it is successful enough to stand on its own. Smyth claimed that “the Machine” for opera did not exist in England, although similar structures were in place for other aspects of composition.43

In her essays on women in music Smyth used this concept to demonstrate how difficult it was for women to gain performances of their works. “The Machine” is essential to the process, hence the difficulties experienced by many composers in getting their operas performed in England. However “the Machine” is governed by ideological considerations and does not necessarily work equally for all composers. Women, she recognised, are outsiders to “the Machine.” The feeling that women were outsiders was common to feminists in the 1920s and 1930s. The feminist journal Time and Tide, for example, maintained that women were outsiders to the political arena and comprised a distinct sex-class.44

Smyth believed a number of pressure groups imposed ideological conditions on access to, and acceptance by, the mainstream of musical life. She used several terms to refer to this concept. “The Gang,” “the Group,” “the Faculty” and “the Inner Circle” all referred to the male groups whom she believed controlled the music scene in England. She referred to, “the Gang ... the Oligarchy that has always ruled musical England”45 believing it to consist of: “University men, rich music patrons, Heads of Colleges, of publishing houses; representative men on big provincial Festival Committees, perhaps a pressman or two.”46

Smyth believed that her own musical education, as well as her sex, put her outside “the Groove,” the term she used for the group of composers and works in the standard repertory of performances. She remarked that she had often reflected:

44 Smith. “British Feminism in the 1920s.”: 50.
on what might have been the fate of [my] Mass, not to mention the 
stimulus to the composer's creative power, had it been written, shall we 
say, by an Oxford undergraduate, late student of the Royal College of 
Music? For all too soon I discovered that English music was in the hands 
of a powerful ring.47

Smyth believed that "the Machine" and "the Gang" work against any 
composer who is outside the usual institutions, or of the wrong gender. She 
observed that both Elgar and Delius, although both originally outsiders, had 
managed to join "the Groove" through the sponsorship of Richter and Beecham 
respectively.48 However, "if you are favoured by a certain Inner Circle I shall call 
'the Group' for short, whose power is half-spiritual, half-material, even a poor 
work can be sure of enough performances to pay the publisher before it dies of 
anæmia."49 Smyth claimed that once a work has been received into the repertory it 
assumes a high status, regardless of the quality: "against a boring bit of music by an 
Inner Circle composer that somehow or other goes the round it is not easy to 
protest ... a few good believe that just because it bored them it must be very 
good."50 The importance of "the Machine" and the fact that women remained 
excluded from the musical establishment were central arguments in Smyth's theory 
regarding gender and composition.

Lacking a theoretical framework for her theories, Smyth made some 
seemingly contradictory statements over the three essays concerning the role of 
gender in performance and composition. These contradictions in part reflect the 
seemingly contrasting faces of feminism during this period.

Apparent contradictions arise in Smyth's theories when she appears to argue 
both for "sameness" and "difference" across the three essays. In her first essay, 
Smyth stated: "the whole English attitude towards women in the field of art is 
ludicrous and uncivilised. There is no sex in art. How you play the violin, paint, or 
compose is what matters."51 Her statement, "there is no sex in art" would appear to 
contradict her belief in a women's voice in art. However, examining the context in 
which she made those statements reveals the reason for the apparent contradiction. 
At the time of writing she was fighting for the inclusion of women in orchestras, 
and therefore is hesitant to allow any difference between males and females that 
could be used as an excuse for excluding women. Indeed in Streaks of Life, she 
makes no mention of a "female voice" in music composition. Regarding women 
gaining full access to the professional music world, she stresses throughout the
essay that there are no differences between men and women. She wrote: "art is a constructive action ... no one can build without strength ... the qualities of men and women of this breed are probably identical."52

However, by the time of writing *A Final Burning of Boats* (1928) and *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), she altered her theory to take into account a perspective that would allow different but equal qualities in composition. In these two essays she not only suggested that men and women might have different voices in composition, but openly encouraged women to explore the possibility. She believed that this would have to be on the condition that any contribution by a woman should not be judged by male perspectives, which would imply an immediate discrediting of the work, but on its own merits. When she discussed the situation of women in orchestras in *Female Pipings in Eden*, rather than reiterating the "no sex in art" statement made in the earlier essay, she stated instead that, "art is bisexual, the female element implicit with the male."53 This allowed her to retain some consistency between her theory of gendered voices in composition and her arguments for women's access to the professional orchestras. She claimed also that, "the souls of all great creative artists are woven of masculine and feminine strands."54 While apparently contradicting her earlier statements that men cannot understand the creative work of women, this statement validated her "equality" arguments by suggesting that in fact, "great" artists will understand "great" work of either gender equally.

This sense of arguing for both equality and difference within the three essays mirrors the arguments in feminism of the 1920s and 1930s. The main debate amongst feminists of this period was regarding the best approach for improving the status of women, of arguing for both the equality of the sexes and promoting the differences between them. Arguing for both "sameness" and "difference," reflecting the "old" and "new" feminist arguments of the period, did contribute to a clouding of Smyth's arguments. Clearly she was developing her thinking through her writings and was searching for a theoretical framework which essentially eluded her.

Another theoretical difficulty arose in Smyth's discussion of the traits she identified in women's style of composition. She wrote: "none of the few women composers who have contrived to get their songs printed are afraid of using melody."55 In claiming this as a stylistic trait of women's composition she raised a circular argument over the issue of socialisation. Historically, women were

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53 Smyth. *Female Pipings in Eden*: 47.
restricted to composing in certain appropriate styles: small songs and piano pieces which were expected to be pretty and melodic. Those conforming to the accepted "feminine" stereotype of women's compositions were the most likely to be accepted for publishing. Therefore what Smyth identified as a trait of "woman's style" was the very format to which women were in fact limited.

It is possible that Smyth was aware of this. She was certainly aware of the labels applied to music and that "feminine" labels were viewed as negative. She cited a case from her own experience of the negative labelling of women's melodic music. For the premiere of *The Boatswain's Mate* she had printed a list of the folk songs used in the programme. Due to a printing error, one of the folk tunes, "Lord Rendal," was omitted from the list. Many of the critics thus failed to identify the folk song in her opera, mistaking it for an original tune and labelled it as an example of "woman's effusion" meanwhile claiming that one of her own tunes ("When the sun is setting") was a "perfect example of English [folk song] melodic genius."56 In identifying a trait which was usually claimed as a negative feminine quality in music it is possible Smyth was trying to challenge the connotations of "feminine" music as negative. Many feminists of this era, believing in essential differences between men and women, turned "feminine" traits, previously held as negative or subordinate, into positive and moral traits to be emulated and held in high esteem. Smyth did not believe that such essentialising of woman's creative voice should lead to relegating it to lower status and believed instead that the fault lay with negative attributes.

There were difficulties for all feminists of this period in arguing for the promotion of the positive aspects of difference in order to achieve equality. Most feminists believed that gender, and gender-specific traits, were socially constructed. However, by the late 1920s "new" feminist argument, "failed to challenge, and in fact contributed to, a reconstruction of gender that circumscribed the roles, activities and possibilities of women."57 The complexities of the theory promoting difference and the failure of these theories to adequately explain or promote the position of women contributed to confusions and contradictions in Smyth's theories.

Smyth's theories on difference, a woman's voice and the difficulties for women having their works accepted into the mainstream, were derived from, and reflected, feminist theory of the time. The apparent contradictions that exist in her theory also reflect the contradictions in feminist thought of the period. However, Smyth's views and arguments were not always expressed with clarity, and her

constantly changing terminology ("the Group," "the Gang," "the Inner Circle") suggest that although influenced by feminist theory of the time she lacked a clear framework for her theory. Despite these difficulties Smyth's writings contain a number of observations and beliefs which are central to the discipline of modern feminist musicology.
Female Pipings in Eden does for women in music what Virginia Woolf did for women in literature; it gives women artists a myth of their own creative origins and urges them to struggle for possession of the past in order to forge the future. Ethel Smyth’s Eve is the mother of music.¹

Smyth’s essay in Female Pipings in Eden, together with those in Streaks of Life and A Final Burning of Boats, represents a point of departure for feminist musicology. These essays foreshadow the feminist musicology writings of the 1980s and 1990s in that they contain a number of theories and observations which have become central to the discipline. Despite Smyth’s lack of clarity within a theoretical framework and her 1920s and 1930s terminology, her arguments and theories closely resemble some modern feminist theories. Although her theories are based on personal experience, she understood the issues from a wider perspective. This has been validated by some recent research. Indeed, her essays can be shown to have profoundly influenced some of today’s writers in the field. Feminist musicologists such as Lucy Green and Marcia Citron have cited Smyth in their own research, using her writings as evidence and support for their own arguments.

Smyth was one of a small number of women to write on gender issues in the arts in the early twentieth century, and was the first to write extensively on music with an openly feminist stance. That Smyth was writing on the subject before the field developed in academic musicology deserves to be acknowledged. A brief survey of the development of feminist musicology demonstrates that little was written on women and music after the publication of Smyth’s essays until the field was fully established in the 1980s and 1990s. Two broad theoretical areas that concern Smyth are also those which preoccupy modern feminist musicology.

In this chapter the theories of modern feminist musicologists, mainly those of Jane Bowers, Marcia Citron and Ruth Solie, are compared with Smyth’s writings.

which reveal similarities between the theories. There is a demonstrable relationship between Smyth's writings and modern feminist musicology. Her writings deserve to be assessed anew in these terms.

Feminist studies came to have a bearing on musicology much later than in other humanist fields; it was not until the mid 1980s that the subject was given much weight within the discipline. Although there was considerable interest in women in history between 1880 and 1920, it was from the 1970s that most research and publication in this field emanated. Despite feminist publications pertaining to the arts, such as *Time and Tide*, and books by authors such as Virginia Woolf, Dora Russell and Winifred Holtby, the middle decades of the twentieth century was not a prolific period. This is probably due to a backlash against feminism and a general decline in interest in the women's rights movement during the 1930s and 1940s. Ruth Solie has suggested that during this period feminism was, "a sin that anyone could be accused of who wrote about women, regardless of her actual argument." It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that feminism re-asserted itself in history, literature and the fine arts.

The development of the field of feminist musicology mirrors the development of Smyth's theories. Smyth began by questioning the perceived absence of women composers and the lack of educational and professional opportunities for women musicians. The development of modern feminist musicology followed the same pattern. From the 1970s research began in compensatory history, rediscovering forgotten women composers. This first stage of feminist musicology shifted the focus of historical studies, rendering women musicians visible, and resulted in the establishment of a "counter-canon." Much of the research in this area involved historical and sociological analysis of the position of women musicians in music history and a critique of social, cultural and sexual politics that affected the careers and musical production of women composers. Researchers were concerned, as Smyth had been earlier, in the examination of the conditions necessary for sustaining a career in music, conditions such as specialist education, publication, performance and critical reception.

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Another area of Smyth’s writings explored theories of gender, difference, a woman’s voice in composition and the place of women musicians within a patriarchal society. Recent research focuses on depictions of gender and sexuality in the works of male and female composers, examining how constructions of gender in music reflect, or inform, images and ideologies of gender in society. Current research also considers the possibility of a female mode of writing, or a female aesthetic. For both Smyth and modern writers this area includes an examination of the more complex issues concerning women’s inferior status, examining the role gender plays in the creation of music and in its critical reception.

Different terms are used to describe these two aspects of feminist research. Ruth Solie identifies the two areas of feminist musicology as “women’s studies” (research focusing primarily on women) and “feminist scholarship” which uses an understanding of gender as an “over-arching societal system” to approach broader issues relating to music and culture. Linda Austern suggests that the terms “material” and “theoretical” describe the disciplinary shift between the two areas. Jane Bowers uses the terms “historical formulations” and “feminist criticism.”

An initial finding of feminist musicology was that women have indeed been involved historically as teachers, performers, composers and publishers. They have been active in both the public and private realms as professionals and amateurs and have been pivotal in establishing and supporting institutions. These findings raise questions regarding women’s lack of visibility in history books: why is their music is not better known and why have there not been larger numbers of women involved professionally in music? In short, why are women’s compositions not central to the musical canon (standard repertoire)?


The canon of Western art music, first raised as a focal issue in musicology in 1987, has become a useful framework for research in feminist musicology. Marcia Citron defines the canon as somewhat equating to "standard repertoire." She says that musicologists can think of it as a loosely codified organism with some degree of flexibility on small exchanges of new members, but which exhibits recalcitrant behaviour on wholesale changes. Her most insightful interpretation is that the power wielded by the canon is enormous: "its members are presumed best and thus most deserving of reiteration in performance, in scholarship, and in teaching."\(^{13}\)

Works by women composers are poorly represented in the canon. Citron's survey of the commonly used music history textbooks demonstrates that women composers are frequently left out of, or given marginal attention in, music histories.\(^{14}\) She observed correctly that concert programmes do not regularly feature works by women composers.\(^{15}\) Research from numerous scholars in the field has demonstrated that this has generally been the situation for women composers throughout history. Women's music has been excluded from the canon largely because women have not had access to the conditions necessary for developing and sustaining a compositional career. Citron outlined those conditions necessary for canon formation (or for a work to become part of the canon) as composition, publication, regular performance, and critical attention.\(^{16}\) These conditions imply professionalism.

The first condition, composition, requires specialised education. Historically, women have been denied access to those institutions (the Church, music conservatoires) traditional for training professional musicians. When the conservatories in Europe were opened to women during the nineteenth century it was on a limited level. Technical skills such as counterpoint, score reading and orchestration were denied to women on the grounds that they were of little use to them, or were beyond their capabilities.

Publication and performance are two further conditions essential for professionalism and for a work to gain access to the canon. From the nineteenth century these two aspects became strongly interlinked. Repeat performances were required for a work to be published. However, women in general were excluded from the public musical establishments that enabled many male composers to gain


\(^{16}\) Citron. "Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon." : 104.
performances. Social and ideological limits restricted women's ability to work as conductors or to gain public performances of their compositions.

The reception of a work, even once it gained publication and performance, is a further crucial stage of the process. However, women’s compositions were often subjected to gender-linked evaluation, and their works judged in a “separate but not equal” category. Paradoxically, women composers were expected to exhibit feminine traits in their music, and yet were criticised for doing so. Equally, a woman’s composition could be criticised for being too “masculine.”

Citron’s outline of the process of canon formation bears very similar resemblance to Smyth’s account in Female Pipings in Eden in which she outlines the particular difficulties for composers attempting regular mainstream performance of their works. Mitigating in these conditions are further complicating factors which both Smyth and modern feminist musicologists have identified. Not only have practical limits been placed on women composers but also ideological limitations have restricted women composers in mainstream musical life. Psychologically too, the invisibility of women composers has negatively impacted upon subsequent generations: the lack of role models and the perceived absence of women composers has contributed to the notion that women are not capable of being “great composers.” Some modern writers actually attribute conscious intent to such limitations. Jane Bowers for instance argues that, “women's access to the full range of musical activities and spheres available in a given culture was limited by exclusionary tactics and various forms of social control.” These restrictions have been in the form of prescriptive literature and social ideology.

Prejudice is evident throughout history. During the nineteenth century composition was seen as an unsuitable profession for women on moral grounds, and ideologically women were regarded as not capable of composition. Christine Battersby has examined gender bias in her deconstruction of “genius” and posits that during the nineteenth century, beliefs surrounding genius and creativity excluded the possibility of women as creators. “This rhetoric praised ‘feminine’ qualities in male creators but claimed females could not – or should not – create.” Belief that women were not capable of composing contributed to the exclusion of women from the institutions necessary for professionalism in music, rendering women to the restriction of the private music sphere.

17 Citron. “Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon.”: 108.
That women need access to the education necessary for a professional composer was a central element in Smyth’s arguments. She was also well aware of the effects of a discriminatory environment, and that negative attitudes and prejudice towards women composers restricted their ability to study and work freely. She gave examples of cases of discrimination against women on the grounds of prescriptive ideology, and of the exclusionary tactics used to restrict women’s access to professional music life. She described the attempts by men to exclude women from the professional music scene as “the determining factor in the position of Women in Music.”

The issue of genre added to the difficulties for women composers. A hierarchy of genre exists in Western art music, which places greater value on large-scale, non-functional, intellectual works. Composition in these forms requires training and access to the “musical machinery.” This was one of Smyth’s terms, referring to the practical conditions for professionalism in music, which Citron adopted in her book, *Gender and the Musical Canon.* One of the implications of restricted access to the formal education necessary for composition was that women were restricted to composing in the smaller genres (those associated with the private sphere) in order to get their works performed. These smaller genres (piano pieces and songs associated with the salon or parlour) assumed a lower status than large-scale works. Smyth’s awareness of this hierarchy of genres was behind her determination to compose in the large-scale genres of opera, concerto, and choral works. She also argued for women’s access to the training institutions and professional orchestras to enable them to gain the necessary skills for composition in these genres.

Some women composers used pseudonyms in order to gain performances and publication of their work. Contemporary research suggests that women in the arts have found it necessary to conceal their identity in this manner in an effort to counter the prejudice against creative women. Marcia Citron, citing the cases of Georges Sand and George Eliot, as well as Smyth, noted that, “the fact that several women have felt compelled to conceal their femaleness and assume authorship under a neutral or masculine identity shows that gender prejudice has indeed been a very real issue.” Gender stereotyping, a common problem for most women composers, has added to the difficulties of gaining performances and publication of their works. The label of “woman composer” placed them in an inferior position. The double standard and sexual aesthetics of the nineteenth and early twentieth century also meant that, “women composers were criticised as being true to their

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sex if their music exhibited supposedly feminine traits, yet derided as attempting to be masculine if their music embodied so-called virile traits." 24 Jill Halstead in *The Woman Composer* notes that, "either way, the composer reinforces her ‘natural’ position as inferior." 25 Furthermore, as Citron points out, the term “feminine” in a review became associated with a separate and lesser kind of music. 26

Smyth also noted that the application of the label “lady composer” was used to immediately place the woman composer at an inferior status and that the term was consistently used when discussing the works of women composers. Smyth used the phrase, “unfit to enter the lists and run side by side” [with male colleagues] to describe the effects of the application of the “lady composer” label. In so doing, Smyth acknowledged that the label prevented women from becoming part of the canon. She referred to being able to “enter the lists.” Disregarding the difference in terminology, Smyth is essentially expounding an aspect of canonic theory. As do modern canon theorists, she acknowledged that reviews of women’s music in gendered terms were detrimental to women composers. She frequently identified a patronising tone and gendered remarks in reviews of women’s work.

The need for women to gain access to professional institutions has been a focus for writers in the past as well as presently. Both modern feminist writers, as well as Smyth, have focused on access to professional orchestras as an example of the difficulty women face. In 1920, when the Hallé Orchestra announced that it was sacking women players on the grounds of “Unity of Style,” Smyth wrote with fury and irony in her article “An Open Secret,” ridiculing the excuses put forward by the orchestra committee but also emphasising the profoundly negative effect this exclusion has on professional women musicians. 27 Modern feminist writers have been involved with a similar debate concerning the all male status of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra has had a policy of excluding women (their policy is also racist, excluding all non-Central Europeans, particularly Asians). Other European orchestras, particularly German and Austrian orchestras, have also come under fire for their employment policies and attitudes towards women. 28

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26 Citron. *Gender and the Musical Canon:* 179.
28 Until February 1997, women were excluded from auditioning for the orchestra and the single woman, a harpist, was admitted only due to a shortage of male harpists. She never had her name printed on concert programmes and was not granted formal membership until 1997, denying her full payment and privileges despite having played with the orchestra for twenty six years. The orchestra resisted admitting women on several grounds, including the argument that they would ruin the orchestra’s sound. The orchestra argues that its “homogeneity,” derived
Smyth believed that integration into the mainstream of musical life was important if women were to be accepted as musical equals. Both Smyth and modern feminists agree that access to professional orchestras can be a vital step in furthering a professional career and a means of gaining the skills necessary for composition or conducting. The income, the opportunities for further engagements, and the potential status as a teacher are essential aids in the professional music career.

One of Smyth’s pioneering insights was her identification of the conditions essential to a work becoming part of the canon. In revealing the historical and sociological reasons for the poor representation of women’s music in the canon of Western art music Smyth shared similar conclusions with later writers. She also anticipated the identification of those in the musical establishment who control the canon.

Feminist musicologists argue that one of the barriers to women’s compositions being accepted into the canon is that the musical establishment – those responsible for the constitution of the canon – is also male-dominated. Marcia Citron defines the musical establishment as a, “corps of professionals consisting of other composers, and of performers, conductors, impresarios, and board members of major performing organisations.” They are, “mostly white, male, and middle-class,” and form “a professional-commercial coalition” with publishers, controlling what works are performed. That the group is made up of men is commonly accepted and musicologists acknowledge, as did Smyth, the negative effect this has had on women’s admittance to the canon.

Smyth’s observations of the wielding of power and influence in the English musical establishments have provided numerous insights. She identified the people who hold the power, as men from the universities and music colleges, publishing houses and festivals who chose performance repertoire. She remarked that, “if the Group were less exclusive in its favouritism one would not quarrel with it.” She believed that even a work of poor quality written by a male could gain acceptance

from this practice of exclusion, gives the orchestra its unique and valued sound. Members of the orchestra interviewed in 1996 suggested that the inclusion of women would affect the “emotional unity” of the orchestra, as well as affecting the “solidarity” of the men in the orchestras, stating that women would “distract” the men and cause “disorder.” The members accepted the occasional woman harpist in the orchestra because, “this instrument is so far at the edge of the orchestra that it doesn’t disturb our emotional unity.” Cited in “First Woman Joins Vienna Philharmonic.” Los Angeles Times. February 28 1997. 1. William Osborne. “Art is Just an Excuse: Gender Bias in International Orchestras.” IAMW Journal (October 1996) 7.

29 Citron. “Gender, Professionalism and the Musical Canon.”: 106
into the canon, and once there achieve a high status and acceptance by the public simply because it is in the repertoire. She wrote that, “against a boring bit of music by an Inner Circle composer that somehow or other goes around it is not easy to protest.... A good few believe that just because it bored them it must be very good.”33 This is a point on which Citron agrees: “The public seems to look to canons for setting standards of taste. If the work is in the canon, assumes a lay person, it must be good.”34

It is clear from Smyth’s arguments that she identified what in modern feminist musicology is referred to as the canon, and that she identified the constituent elements of the canon. She referred to the “Machine” to describe the practical conditions that composers are dependent on for gaining performances of their works. The “Machine” included the “Group” (she also used the terms “Faculty” “Inner Circle” and “Gang”) who control who and what works gain admission to the “Groove” – the composers and works performed as part of the standard repertory. The support of the “Group” enables a composer to become part of the “Groove.”35 However, although she identified the processes of canon formation and the way in which the canon functions she limited her analysis of the situation to a critique of the practical implications for women composers. She did not develop her ideas into a cohesive theory. The variety of terms she used to refer to the music establishment and the processes of gaining admission to the canon, indicates the difficulty she had in finding appropriate terminology for her arguments. Although she was not able to formulate a comprehensive theory from her beliefs, modern feminist musicology is indebted to her insights.36

For Smyth, there was a connection between access to the canon and a woman’s voice in composition. She believed in innate differences between men and women. This belief shaped her theory of a “woman’s voice” in composition. She argued that creative women would add a new voice to music composition and she used this position to argue for greater access to professional music life for women. She insisted that in composition, as in other fields, a new work by a woman should be viewed as “an element necessary to an all-round vision of things human.”37 She also insisted throughout her essays that women’s composition was not properly acknowledged because, due to innate differences, men in general were unable to understand a “woman’s voice.” Citron agrees that there is a link between a woman’s style and the process of music becoming part of the canon.38

33 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 17.
37 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 25.
38 Citron. Gender and the Musical Canon: 164.
There is considerable debate in modern feminism regarding the concept of “difference” in relation to art forms, and whether the expression of difference, if indeed it can be detected in art, is innate or socially constructed.\(^3^9\) Ruth Solie summarises the debate, writing that “the majority of feminist scholars reject the idea of any innate gender traits, proposing a variety of mechanisms by which apparent gender differences may be, and have been, culturally engineered.” She points out that there are some who disagree, claiming that differences are biologically constructed, and need to be acknowledged.\(^4^0\)

Applied to music composition, this debate centres around the possibility of a “woman’s voice” in composition, and whether this voice, if indeed it can be identified, is the result of innate gender traits or historical conditions. This inquiry regarding the evidence for a woman’s voice is paralleled in the fields of literature and the fine arts.

Scholars have examined the works of individual women composers in terms of style, technique and genre in an attempt to ascertain whether they might, “construct images of the human experience which differ significantly from the images constructed by men”, in other words, whether they are composed with a woman’s voice.\(^4^1\) Musicologists have examined whether the specific elements of musical language – harmony, melody, rhythm, texture – can “bear the identifying stamp of a female creator.”\(^4^2\)

Some claim to have identified tendencies in compositions by women that indicate a “woman’s voice.” Composer Kay Gardner, who has studied the work of contemporary American women composers, believes that certain musical structures can be associated with women composers. She is adamant that there is a woman’s musical form and that she has identified it. She believes that “women write innately and naturally in circular form.”\(^4^3\) Similarly, in her book Feminine Endings Susan McClary examines the work of Janika Vandervelde, as an example of


a woman composer who chooses to create in a mode that draws on her experience as a woman. 44

Other critics are divided on the possibility of identifying a woman’s voice. The debate is more complex now than when Smyth raised it. One of the main points of concern with arguments promoting the concept of a woman’s voice is the risk of essentialism. An essentialist argument, ascribing innate characteristics to women and implying that all women compose with a distinct voice, ignores social or historical context and individual difference. Contemporary feminists and musicologists are wary of essentialist arguments, since they have been used historically to justify exclusion. Many musicologists argue that socio-cultural factors play a significant role in gender identification in composition. Gisela Ecker wrote that a survey of creative work by women would not necessarily reveal anything “essentially feminine,” but rather would reveal that work by women was strongly influenced by women’s position in society and the values a society attaches to sexual difference. 45 Further to this, Renée Cox suggests that because qualities associated with femininity have traditionally been considered inferior, women may have adopted a masculine mode of expression in order to be taken seriously as artists. 46 This implies that women may not yet be composing with their “own voice.” Indeed, Citron is of the belief that there is no “specific language, style, or dynamic that every woman utilises.” 47 In general, feminist musicologists conclude that identifiable traits in the work of historical women composers are the result of socialisation and historical ideology. 48

Smyth’s theory on a woman’s voice inadvertently corroborates this. She claimed to be able to identify the traits of a woman’s voice in composition as including a preference for melody.

I fancy that even an average woman has more inward freedom than men; is less conventional, and on the other hand less haunted by the dread, if an artist or a writer, of being commonplace. None of the few women composers who have contrived to get their songs printed are afraid of melody. 49

However, the traits Smyth identified as examples of a woman’s innate voice were in fact the styles in which women were limited to compose. Women had historically been restricted to composing in the smaller forms and were encouraged to write melodic music. Smyth’s remark can be interpreted in the modern context, not that women are not afraid of being “commonplace” but that their training (or lack thereof) has meant that women composers have tended to compose without extending the boundaries of contemporary composition.

One modern feminist theory is that not only might a woman write “as a woman,” but that she might also respond “as a woman.” Literary critic Patrocinio Schweickart posits a theory of response, in that “for a woman a sense of full meaning as a respondent is possible only when she is responding to a work authored by a woman.”50 She asks: “What does it mean for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by a woman writing as a woman?”51

When Smyth claimed to recognise a “woman’s voice,” she is proposing something along the lines of reader-response theory. She believed that “non-creative women, listening to the song of their sisters, be it literature, painting, or music, will say: ‘O what is this that knows the way I came?’”52 For Smyth the differences between men and women, and the gendered voice of women’s composition, equated to men not being capable of understanding women’s work. In terms of reader-response theory her ideas were fairly naive. She did not take the discussion further than suggesting that women are “predisposed by nature to understand woman’s talk.”53 Response theory has since become a highly developed argument which is too complex to do justice to here. Citron acknowledges its complexity in suggesting that it is very difficult to show that there is a female voice in reception or in responding to music, and further, that as women have generally been socialised in male culture they may have “little basis for a response that is specifically female.”54

Whatever the preferred side of the argument, feminist musicologists have given this subject considerable weight. Concerning women artists, Linda Nochlin suggested that ignoring the gender of the creator could be “tantamount to declaring that art exists in a vacuum instead of in the complex, social, historical, psychological, and political matrix within which it is actually produced.” She also reminds us that historically women have been encouraged to create in certain fields.

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50 Citron. “Feminist Approaches to Musicology.”: 27.
52 Smyth. Female Pipings in Eden: 55.
53 Smyth. A Final Burning of Boats: 44.
which may lend towards identification of women with those genres.\textsuperscript{55} That modern musicologists have not completely dismissed the issue suggests that although Smyth's theory of a woman's voice in composition had flaws, the issues she raised were important then as now.

Smyth's perceptive social comment has been recognised by some modern feminist writers as supportive of their arguments. In her book \textit{Gender and the Musical Canon}, Citron uses Smyth's arguments to substantiate her own. Citron quotes Smyth's comparison between literary and musical careers as evidence for the different social structures supporting the various arts forms. She quotes Smyth's remarks about women's access to education and uses Smyth's analogy regarding female traditions, to support her own argument.\textsuperscript{56} Citron acknowledges Smyth's recognition of the issues surrounding the canon, using Smyth's term the "musical machinery."\textsuperscript{57} Lucy Green in \textit{Music, Gender, Education} (1997) credits Smyth with being one of the first to raise the issue of a female voice in composition.\textsuperscript{58}

That Citron owes a great deal to Smyth has been established, but her influence is demonstrably wider than that. For instance, extracts from \textit{Female Pipings in Eden} are reprinted in Carol Neuls-Bates 1982 anthology of writings on and by women in music. This well distributed text in college and university courses exposes this seminal piece of Smyth's writing to many scholars and students.\textsuperscript{59}

Even though the means for doing so differed in kind and style, both Smyth's arguments and those of contemporary feminist musicologists are attempts to explain why women's music has been largely excluded from the canon. It is undeniable that Smyth was the first writer on women and music to raise these issues, although it took later scholars to weave her observations into a theory. Her pioneering work deserves to be recognised as such.

The reception of Sophie Drinker's book \textit{Music and Women} (1948) serves as a useful contrast to the recognition of Smyth's writings. This was one of the few books on the subject of women's music published post-Smyth. Described in the title as "the story of women in their relation to music," it sought to examine the role and position of women in music throughout history and in many cultures. Drinker's approach and subject matter is very different from Smyth's and there is no evidence to indicate that Drinker knew of Smyth's work, but although the scope of

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\textsuperscript{56} Citron. \textit{Gender and the Musical Canon}: 59-60, 76.
\textsuperscript{57} Citron. \textit{Gender and the Musical Canon}: 81.
\textsuperscript{58} Green. \textit{Music, Gender, Education}: 122.
Drinker’s work is much broader; there are similarities between the two writers. Both wrote on the situation of women in orchestras as well as on questions of access to education and professional opportunities. However, Drinker’s analysis of the situation was more extensive than Smyth’s. Drinker’s work was not acknowledged by critics at the time and her ideas were not embraced by the academic community, however, during the late 1970s the book served as “the bible of the women-in-music movement.” While Drinker’s work has been identified as “foreshadowing” later feminist musicology, Smyth’s work has not been likewise recognised even though her theories clearly represent a point of departure for modern feminist musicology. The issues which concerned Smyth have remained in focus in modern feminist musicology and have been since placed within theoretical frameworks.

CONCLUSION

Smyth developed her views on the position of women in music as a result of personal experience. Throughout her career she struggled against prejudice and discrimination and used this experience as the basis for her writings. Her active involvement in the suffrage movement in England gave her an awareness that the prejudices she faced were not unique to her and that the personal is also political. During the 1920s she campaigned actively for equality for women musicians, and her attack on the employment policies of the professional orchestras formed the basis for her early writings on women in music.

Although some scholars have concentrated on Smyth’s work, they largely neglect her music and her feminist theories and concentrate instead on her personality, eccentricity, gender, love of travel, and numerous friendships. Smyth defied the conventions for a woman of her generation in many aspects. As a woman composer of large-scale works who sought professional status, and who was outspoken on feminist issues during a period in which the women’s movement experienced a backlash, she provoked many male colleagues. Some responded by ridiculing her personally and professionally. She was cruelly belittled by caricature and by comment that her essays were merely the grumblings of a second-rate composer. Smyth was well aware of the manner in which the media treated her and the effects of this on her portrayal in history, which was one reason why she wrote

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60 Solie. “Afterword: Sophie Drinker’s Achievement.”: 340. Solie noted that “Drinker sometimes does seem almost unaware of the existence of contemporary women composer.”

so extensively on the subject. Unfortunately, the neglect of her essays on women in music has contributed to the perpetuation of this image.

Her three essays are important documents as reflections of feminist thinking of the period. Although they were written partly with a personal agenda – to set straight the record of her own career – she also had a strong desire to write on behalf of other women musicians who were not in a position to address the issues. The essays dealt in part with the practical issues of access to education, professional opportunities, and issues of prejudice and discrimination. They challenged assumptions that women were not capable of composing, demonstrating that women had historically not been given the same opportunities as men. Smyth was not alone in speaking out on these issues but her three essays, together with the frequent references in her other books to the situation, place her as the most outspoken among her contemporaries. Although her arguments were based on personal experience, her conclusions and theories are essentially accurate; she perceived the issues clearly, even if her writing style did not assist her in expression of clarity.

Some of the contradictions in her arguments reflect the debates in feminism of the 1920s and 1930s. She was not alone in exploiting the feminist contradictions of the period to suit her arguments. She argued that there were no differences between the style of men and women performers, when this argument of equality added weight to an argument in favour of women gaining access to professional performance opportunities. On the other hand she posited that men and women might compose with a different voice, and used this argument to demonstrate how this could account for men dismissing the work of women composers. She argued that the network of male musicians and administrators who controlled the production of music in England were prejudiced against, and could not understand, the work of women composers.

Smyth mirrored 1920s and 1930s views on the position of women in music, demonstrating an awareness of the prejudices inherent within a patriarchal society. She introduced arguments on feminist issues which have only emerged in academic musicological debate in recent decades. Why her essays and theories have not been fully embraced by modern musicology can be partly attributed to a resistance within academic musicology to cultural criticism. The personal aspect of her writings also facilitated dismissal of her works. Although sometimes lacking eloquence (but never wit) Smyth’s writings on women in music were an attempt to speak universally. Smyth was unable to write without using herself as an example but while it is undeniable that she was bitter about being outside the patriarchal music environment, it is a distortion to claim that she was merely publicising her own causes. Smyth was not able to discuss the subject dispassionately. She was
outspoken because she recognised that others could not be. That she was well aware of the image others had of her did not deter her.

A revision of the history of women composers could afford to take into account social context and, specifically, Smyth's profound feminist beliefs and arguments. The significance of her arguments needs acknowledgment both in terms of her career and as an perceptive analysis of turn of the century English musical society. Smyth expressed her theories in a hostile environment and her image has suffered since as a result. However, she foreshadowed thought and deserves acknowledgment as a pioneer of early feminist musicology.


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