

# ETHEL SMYTH

b. April 22, 1858

d. May 8, 1944

## COMPOSER & SUFFRAGETTE

*"I feel I must fight for [my music], 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."*

Ethel Mary Smyth was a pioneering British composer who helped popularize opera in the United Kingdom. She became a fervent champion of women's rights and the first woman composer to be awarded damehood.

Smyth was born the fourth of eight children in Sidcup, Kent, outside of London. Her father, a major general in the Royal Artillery, opposed her musical aspirations. Smyth defiantly persevered, learning from esteemed tutors. She studied composition at Leipzig Conservatory in Germany and received encouragement from Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Antonín Dvořák and Johannes Brahms.

**Until 2016, her 1902 opera, "Der Wald," was the only opera composed by a woman ever produced by The Metropolitan Opera.**

Along with operas, Smyth wrote choral arrangements, symphonies and chamber music. She first captured attention for her "Mass in D" (1892). Her 1902 opera, "Der Wald," broke attendance records in London. It became the only opera composed by a woman ever produced by the New York Metropolitan Opera. This held true for well over a century, until 2016.

Smyth composed her most famous work, "The Wreckers," in 1906. Critics extolled it as one of the most important English operas.

By 1910 Smyth had established herself as a leading member of the women's suffrage movement in the United Kingdom. She took time off from composing to join the Women's Social and Political Union. She participated in marches and protests for women's rights and full equality. During this period, she was

incarcerated for two months after the authorities arrested her and more than 100 other suffragettes for breaking the windows of their political opponents. In 1911 Smyth composed "The March of Women," which became the anthem for England's women's movement.

Smyth was public about her nonconformist sexual identity. Many of her romantic partners were famous women, including the French Empress Eugénie and the English modernist writer Virginia Woolf.

Smyth wrote 10 books and many have been written about her. She openly discussed her experiences in several autobiographies. She once wrote, "I wonder why it is so much easier for me to love my own sex more passionately than yours."

In 1922 Smyth was named a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her accomplishments as a composer. In 1926 Oxford University presented her with an honorary doctorate. Despite the fanfare, as a woman she struggled to get her music performed.

For her 75th birthday, Smyth was honored with a festival in Royal Albert Hall celebrating her lifetime achievements. She began to lose her hearing at age 54 and went completely deaf before the end of her life. She died at age 86.



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