

## **Dame Ethel Smyth Factsheet by Historian Lewis Orchard**

### **Her Life**

Ethel Mary Smyth was born in Marylebone (then Middlesex) on 22 April 1858, the fourth of the Smyth family's eight children. She led a highly eventful life both in England and partly in Germany as one of the greatest British composers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although her all-absorbing passion and much of her time was spent on music composition, she was a keen sportswoman, and an energetic and frequent writer on musical matters and women's rights within the musical establishment. She was also a well-regarded author with 10 books published in her lifetime. She supported the suffrage cause and for 2 years was an active member of the WSPU as a suffragette. She never married having rejected an offer from her long-standing friend Henry Brewster. She died at her house in Hook Heath, Woking on 8 May 1944.

### **Her Homes**

Shortly after her birth, probably on her military father's return from India, the family moved to Sidcup, then part of Kent. In 1867 when her father was posted to Aldershot, the family moved to a large house, 'Frimhurst', at Frimley Green, Surrey. When she went to Germany in 1877 to study music, she lived in Leipzig, but 'Frimhurst' remained Ethel's English base when spending part of each year at home as required by her father. On her father's death in 1894, 'Frimhurst' was sold and Ethel moved to a cottage on Portsmouth Road, Frimley which she named 'One Oak'. Finally she moved to Hook Heath, Woking in 1910 to a newly built house she named 'Coign' where she remained until her death.

### **Ethel the Composer**

She had decided at an early age to devote her life to music as a result of listening to one of the Smyth family's governesses who came from Germany and was very musical. Later, through a friend of her mother, she received her first lessons in composition from an army officer who made her aware of the music of the great composers. Ethel decided that she must go to Leipzig, at that time one of the most important conservatories, to study composition and eventually, after years of battling her father, who strongly disapproved, went there in 1877. Dissatisfied with the teaching at the Leipzig Conservatorium which had deteriorated since Mendelssohn's death, she took lessons from Heinrich von Herzogenberg of the Bach Verein and then moved in with the Herzogenbergs, becoming close friends with Heinrich's wife, Lisl. The Herzogenbergs were well connected to the musical establishment and as a result, Ethel met and came to know important composers notably Brahms, Grieg and latterly Tchaikovsky who encouraged her to compose orchestral works. Ethel composed many works, initially chamber music when studying with Herzogenberg and later large-scale orchestral works including a great Mass in D, a double concerto for violin and horn, and six operas. Sadly severe deafness set in during her later years and she composed very little after 1930. She was awarded Doctorates of Music by both Durham and Oxford Universities and was awarded the DBE in 1922.

### **Ethel the Writer**

She was an indefatigable memoirist and writer on many subjects but chiefly on musical matters and what she perceived as a male prejudice against women in the musical establishment. She commenced writing her books when still working for the French Army as a radiographer at a hospital at Vichy during WW1 saying that musical composition was impossible under the conditions but writing her memoirs was an acceptable relief. In all she wrote 10 books published in her lifetime, the most important being her memoirs which included pen portraits of various luminaries including Brahms, Emmeline Pankhurst and Empress Eugénie of France who lived in exile nearby in Farnborough. There is also one volume on her beloved dogs and biographies of her friends Maurice Baring and the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham.

### **Ethel the Suffragette**

She was deeply concerned with the apparent lack of rights for women in many aspects of life but particularly so in respect of what she perceived as prejudice against women in the musical world. She wrote many articles and sections of some of her books on this subject and was particularly concerned with the difficulty of securing performances of her own works given the sexual prejudice she experienced. Whilst she remained sympathetic to women's causes in effect all her life, she devoted 2 years to the WSPU, inspired by meeting Emmeline Pankhurst, and suffered a brief period of imprisonment in Holloway jail for breaking the window of the Colonial Secretary's London home. It was during this time that her song 'The March of the Women' was adopted as the WSPU anthem. Although approving of the aims of the WSPU and 'Votes for Women', she discontinued her support after her 2-year period as a voluble suffragette.

### **Ethel the Sportswoman**

From the beginning when, as a child, she won a bet for riding a pig, to the end of her long life when she enjoyed membership of the Woking Golf Club, Ethel was a keen sportswoman. In addition to golf, tennis and cycling, she was a competent horsewoman enjoying hunting, an adventurous rock climber in the Alps and a walker especially in Germany, Switzerland and Italy. She was also a member of the White Heather ladies' cricket team around the turn of the century, at that time a rarity. It was her proud boast that she never lost a golf ball even when, 'as a result of a directional error', it landed in the rough and was retrieved by her beloved dog.

### **Ethel in Woking**

She came to live in Woking in 1910 when she took up residence in a new cottage designed for her by Clotilde, the architect daughter of Henry Brewster, and paid for by the American patroness of the arts Mary Dodge, a friend of one of her sisters. The site in Hook Heath Road was ideally located opposite Woking Golf Club grounds for Ethel's interest in the game. Musically she became involved in local activities including conducting her own works: her compositions from 1910 to 1930 were composed while permanently based at 'Coign'. All of her books were written after she had settled in Woking. She had many visitors and there is a photograph of her protecting Emmeline Pankhurst when police officers came to 'Coign' to re-arrest her during the infamous 'Cat and Mouse' regime, and another of Ethel at 'Coign' standing together with the Princesse de Polignac, the well-known Parisian patroness and hostess. Ethel was a proud citizen of Woking and is reported to have stated that "if ever I were to be ennobled, the title I would choose would be Ethel, Duchess of Woking".

### **Finally**

Ethel was a remarkable woman of indomitable spirit and boundless energy but despite her involvement in many other areas, she always insisted that her true and primary vocation was that of a composer.