# "An Introduction to the Life and Organ Music of Ethel Smyth"



Dr. Sarah Moon AGO Boston June 25, 2014 8:30 am

#### **Biographical Events**

- 1858 born in London, England
- 1867 Smyth Family moves to Frimhurst
- 1870 Smyth studies Beethoven sonatas; composes chants, hymns, and other music related to the church
- 1872 Smyth sent to school in Putney, where London musicians came to teach students
- 1877 Studies composition, counterpoint and theory, and piano at the Leipzig Conservatory; befriends Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, Lili Wach (Mendelssohn's daughter), and other musical figures, including Johannes Brahms
- 1878 begins private counterpoint lessons with Heinrich von Herzogenberg; leaves Leipzig Conservatory
  - [chorale preludes thought to have been composed between these years]
- 1885 Receives organ lessons from Sir Walter Parratt, organist of St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle
- 1890 Settles back in England with her parents
- 1891 Smyth's mother dies
- 1893 Mass in D premiered in London by the Royal Society of London
- 1894 Smyth's father dies
- 1898 First opera, *Fantasio*, premiers in Weimar
- 1910 Receives honorary doctorate from Durham University; Participates in the Women's Suffrage movement for 2 years
- 1913 Organ Chorale preludes published by Novello
- 1914-1918 WWI: Smyth serves as a radiographer and was attached to the thirteenth division of the French army in Vichy
- 1919 hearing declines; writes her autobiography, *Impressions that Remained*; she eventually publishes 9 other books of essays and memoirs
- 1922 Becomes a Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire
- 1926 Awarded an honorary doctorate from Oxford University
- 1938 Composes "Prelude on a Traditional Irish Air," dedicated to author Edith Somerville
- 1944 died on May 8

#### List of Published Organ Works by Smyth

Chorale preludes, published in 1913 by Novello; currently available from Vivace Press, ed. Colette Ripley

- "Du, o schönes Weltgebäude"
- "O Gott, du frommer Gott," 2 settings
- "Erschienen ist der herrlich' Tag"
- Prelude and Fugue on "O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid"

### Partial List of Unpublished Organ Works by Smyth (housed in the British Library)

Organ fugue in b minor

A compositional study on "O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr Frommen"

Sketches for two three-part fugues and a four-part fugue in D minor, in addition to dozens of counterpoint exercises

<sup>&</sup>quot;Prelude on a Traditional Irish Air," published in 1938

## "Du, o schönes Weltgebäude"

**Example 1:** Johann Crüger, "Du, o schönes Weltgebäude," extracted melody



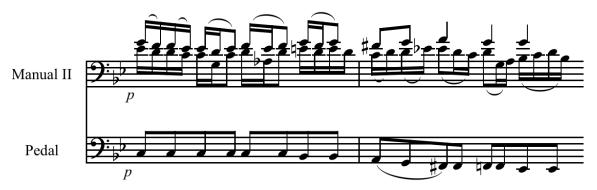
#### Example 2:

- 1. Du, o schönes Weltgebäude, magst gefallen, wem du willst; ist doch deine eitle Freude stets mit lauter Angst umhüllt. Denen, die den Himmel hassen, will ich ihre Weltlust lassen; mich verlangt nach dir allein, lieber Herr und Heiland mein!
- 2. Müde, die der Arbeit Menge und der heiße Strahl beschwert, wünschen, daß des Tages Länge werde durch die Nacht verzehrt, daß sie nach so vielen Lasten könnten sanft und süße rasten. Mein Wunsch ist, bei dir zu sein, lieber Herr und Heiland mein!
- 1. Thou, O Fair Creation-Building! Let them joy in thee who may; All thy light-spun show and gilding Cloud with grief their best display. Leave to him, the heaven-despiser, Bliss that makes the soul no wiser: My great wish is but to be, Jesu, saving-health, with thee.
- 2. Weary ones, with serving cumbered, Faint with burdens and the sun, Wish the hours more swiftly numbered, And the day to darkness run; That, when many toils had pressed them, They might sweetly, softly rest them: My great wish is but to be, Jesu, my repose, with thee!<sup>2</sup>

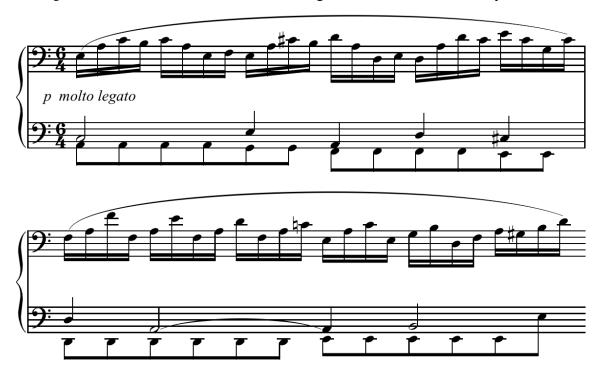
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Johann Franck, "Du, o schönes Weltgebäude," Bach Cantatas Website, http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Texts/Chorale140-Eng3.htm (accessed March 27, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Frothingham, *Metrical Pieces*, *Translated and Original*, *Volume 2* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1870), 232, http://books.google.com/books?id=7I1JAAAAYAAJ (accessed July 9, 2013).

**Example 3:** Smyth, "Du, o schönes Weltgebäude," mm. 1-2, accompanying voices only (manual II and pedal)



**Example 4:** Brahms, "Herzlich tut mich verlangen," mm. 1-2, manuals only



Both composers appear to reference the accompanimental pattern in Bach's "Ich ruf zu dir," BWV 639, from the *Orgelbüchlein*, seen in Example 5:

**Example 5:** J.S. Bach, "Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ," BWV 639, mm. 1-2, accompanying voices only (manual II and pedal)



\*My doctoral dissertation explores each of Smyth's published chorale preludes and includes a performance practice guideline. Free access to my complete dissertation, "The Organ Music of Ethel Smyth: A Guide to Its History and Performance Practice," is available at <a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2022/17573">http://hdl.handle.net/2022/17573</a>.