“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*, premieres in Weimar
1890 – Receives honorary doctorate from Durham University; Participates in the Women’s Suffrage movement for 2 years
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”
“Prelude on a Traditional Irish Air,” published in 1938

**Partial List of Unpublished Organ Works by Smyth (housed in the British Library)**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
“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!

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. 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!

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!

---


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)