

**“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"
- "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**Partial List of Unpublished Organ Works by Smyth (housed in the British Library)**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!<sup>1</sup>

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>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>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)

The score for Example 3 consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled "Manual II" and the bottom staff is labeled "Pedal". Both staves are in the bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and a 6/8 time signature. The Manual II part features a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and some slurs, starting with a dynamic marking of *p*. The Pedal part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth-note patterns, also starting with a dynamic marking of *p*.

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

The score for Example 4 consists of two systems of grand staff notation. Each system has a treble clef on the left and a bass clef on the right. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 6/4. The first system includes a dynamic marking of *p molto legato*. The music features a melodic line in the treble clef with a long slur over the first two measures, and a bass line with a similar slur. The second system continues the melodic and bass lines with similar phrasing and slurs.

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)

The image displays a musical score for the first two measures of the accompanying voices (manual II and pedal) for J.S. Bach's chorale prelude "Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ," BWV 639. The score is written in G minor, common time, and 4/4 time. It consists of four staves: two for manual II (bass clef) and two for pedal (bass clef). The manual II part features a melodic line with slurs and a final fermata. The pedal part provides a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note rhythm.

*\*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 <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/17573>.*