



For Immediate Release (New York, November 9, 2018):

Experiential Orchestra announces plans to create the world-premiere commercial recording of British composer Dame Ethel Smyth's final composition *The Prison*. The orchestra hopes that creating a top-quality recording of this recently rediscovered composition dating from the very end of her career will increase Smyth's standing as a composer world-wide.

Prominent Smyth scholars Liz Wood and Amy Zigler will contribute the liner notes. The orchestra will be the Experiential Orchestra, comprised of top-level New York freelancers (EXO players are drawn from Decoda and other top ensembles, with several players also serving as substitute players with the New York Philharmonic, Metropolitan Orchestra, and others), and soloists will be Sarah Brailey and Grammy-Award winning baritone Dashon Burton. The chorus will be the Clarion Choir, directed by Steven Fox; Production will be by Soundmirror and Blanton Alspaugh.

While gathering a group of "assistant producers," major donors over \$10,000, the orchestra has also launched a Kickstarter campaign to encourage a broad range of support, and to help publicize the project. In addition to private donors, Liane Curtis and Women's Philharmonic Advocacy have provided multiple grants to the recording project, and have championed Smyth's work through numerous projects.

The campaign has already been selected as a "Project we love" at Kickstarter, and was the featured Music project on Monday October 8.

In order to spread the word about the recording and to tell the remarkable story of Dame Ethel Smyth more broadly, EXO has teamed up with The Outrage, a DC-based organization that has created merchandise for the Women's March, March for our lives, and other causes.

"Now is her time," music director James Blachly says about this three-year-long project. "We believe that the world is finally ready to celebrate this phenomenal composer on her own terms – as a great and accomplished composer, not only because of her role as a suffragette."

There is a particular interest in heroines of the past, women who accomplished much more than they are given credit for. (The New York Times "Overlooked" obituary series is an example of this.) Between the #MeToo movement and a record number of women running for – and winning – public office in the midterm elections, gender equality and gender discrimination have rarely been so prominent in public discussion, perhaps not since the suffrage movement following the First World War.

Indeed, Smyth wrote about the discrimination she faced as a female composer throughout her 50+ year career, with critics saying her music was "too feminine," or "too masculine," or "pretty good – for a woman." Brahms reportedly approved of her music, but did not at first believe it had been written by a woman.

Gender inequality is pervasive across all fields, but in composition, the numbers have been especially grim: according to Rob Deemer's Women Composer Database, currently 2% of the music performed in concert halls is by women. And that's more than it used to be.

Orchestral institutions across the country are finally beginning to make progress on this troubling disparity in various ways, and are emphasizing women in their programming more than ever before, with the New York Philharmonic highlighting a commission from Ashley Fure; The American Composers Orchestra is calling their opening concert "Phenomenal Women," two of the last three Pulitzer Prize winners have been women, and much more.

But even as contemporary women are being afforded more opportunities than in the past, it is important to have historical figures to turn to for inspiration. Smyth is a rare example of a woman composer who seemed able to overcome nearly all the adversity she faced to rise to true international prominence.

Many people have chosen to support the project because of Smyth's role as a barrier-breaking female composer, decades ahead of her time, and others because they are inspired personally by the additional difficulties she faced and overcame as a lesbian. Other donors find her leadership and willingness to go to jail for women's suffrage most compelling.

EXO music director James Blachly notes that he first fell for the music itself, and then got to know her historical significance. He recounts that "the first time I conducted excerpts the piece in rehearsal, in 2016, I felt goosebumps go up and down my body. This was the first time that anyone in this country had heard the piece with orchestra, and it was like a genie coming out of a bottle, this incredible piece finally coming to life again." He adds "her music is not only unique, it is masterful."

After performing excerpts of the work with the The Dream Unfinished orchestra in 2016, Mr. Blachly commissioned three composers to engrave the work from manuscript, and sent these parts to G. Schirmer, Inc./Novello & Co., becoming the official editor of their current performance edition. “Once they hear the recording, we want orchestras around the world to be able to perform this piece, and creating performance-ready parts was crucial to that,” Blachly says.

As noted recently by Alex Ross in the *New Yorker*, Dame Ethel Smyth was the first woman to have an opera performed at the Met, (the second woman to be produced wasn't until 2016, when Kaaija Saariaho's *L'amour de loin* was given). Bruno Walter conducted *The Wreckers* at Covent Garden in 1910, and Sir Thomas Beecham conducted a retrospective of her works at Royal Albert Hall in 1934. Donald Tovey was also a champion of her music, and Hermann Levi advocated for her music for decades.

With this recording and edition, Blachly joins two prominent conductors who have championed Smyth in recent years: Leon Botstein, who presented her opera *The Wreckers* at Bard in 2015, and Mark Shapiro, who has been a long-time champion of her music. In April and May 2018, Mr. Blachly and Mr. Shapiro joined forces to combine their two performances of *The Prison*, scheduled independently, in what they called a “Co-Premiere.”

Despite her success during her own lifetime, her music is rarely performed now, and her music is seldom taught in conservatories. The intention of this recording is to create a compelling case for this final composition, and to bring Dame Ethel Smyth to greater prominence.

More information about *The Prison* below.

Link [here](#) for a video about the project with interviews with soloists

Kickstarter link [here](#)

For interviews or more information: info@experientialorchestra.com

Link to “Herstory” campaign at [The Outrage](#)

Soprano soloist [Sarah Brailey](#)

Grammy-Winning Baritone soloist [Dashon Burton](#)

[Experiential Orchestra](#)

Music Director and Conductor [James Blachly](#)

Grammy-Nominated [Clarion Choir](#)

7-time Grammy Winner [Blanton Alspaugh and Soundmirror](#)

ABOUT *THE PRISON*

Set for soprano and baritone soloists, chorus, and full orchestra, *The Prison* is a Mahler-length symphony in two parts, “Close on Freedom” and “The Deliverance.” On the title page, Smyth quotes the last words of Greek philosopher Plotinus “I am striving to release that which is divine within us, and merge it in the universally divine.”

The symphony is at once a unique expression for Smyth – it is her only symphony – and also a summary of her previous compositional life, including a Bach-inspired organ prelude, beautifully orchestrated, that starts the second half of the piece. The instrumentation and use of two soloists would seem to be a nod to the Brahms Requiem, and given her devotion to Brahms’s music (which Tchaikovsky chided her for in letters to her), this would resonate as a motivation for her final large scale composition. But the music itself reveals other influences, including a dark Wagnerian orchestration palette, Straussian soaring melodies over rich harmonies in the orchestra, and references to her composition teacher von Herzogenberg’s fugue on a bird-song. But the symphony also shows her breaking free in a new musical language, unique to her alone, and unique to this last period of her compositional life.

It is set to words by Harry Bennet Brewster, Smyth’s creative partner and close friend; the two exchanged more than 1,000 letters. There is more to their relationship as well—a complex love triangle stemming from Brewster’s wife Julia, who was the daughter of Smyth’s composition teacher in Leipzig, and Julia’s sister Lisl, who was a love interest of Smyth’s. The tension between Brewster and Smyth was such that they agreed to break off contact for five years. After Julia’s death, Brewster and Smyth resumed their friendship, and co-wrote libretti for several of Smyth’s operas.

Featured in the second half of the work is a melody called the “Seikolos fragment,” which had been re-discovered in 1922, and was considered the oldest surviving complete melody. Smyth’s incorporation of the melody into the symphony weaves together the philosophy of the text, in that the melody is from ancient Greece, and the words that were originally set, upon which Smyth sets Brewster’s words. In the Greek melody, the words are: “While you live, shine/ have no grief at all/ life exists only for a short while/ and Time demands his due.” (Translation John G. Landels)

The text to the symphony describes the writing of a man in a solitary cell and his reflections on his past life and his preparations for death. But the text is poetic and reflective, with layers of meaning and metaphor. Thus the “prison” is both an actual jail, and a philosophical representation of the “shackles of self,” as Brewster describes them. And of course Smyth herself spent time in prison, in 1912, after throwing a stone through an MP’s window, so this is not an abstraction in her life.

While the texts for *The Prison* are written by Brewster, they are carefully curated by Smyth, drawn from a philosophical work Brewster wrote in 1891, and which Smyth took upon herself to publish in its entirety shortly before the premiere of the symphony which bears the same name.

At the end of the piece we hear a distant trumpet, perhaps a reference to her military father, who had served in India and was a dominant force; he had forbidden her from leaving home to study composition, and at 17 she defied his wishes and left for Leipzig. But that is only one interpretation; she herself wrote about how she wished the work to be a motivation to end war, and perhaps the last post reflects purely this desire for peace.

What is clear in exploring the symphony is that it is the work of a master composer at the end of her life. Written as she was far along in becoming deaf, it also reveals a new, deeply personal musical language.

-Notes for this press release written by James Blachly; official liner notes will be written by Elizabeth Wood for the recording.