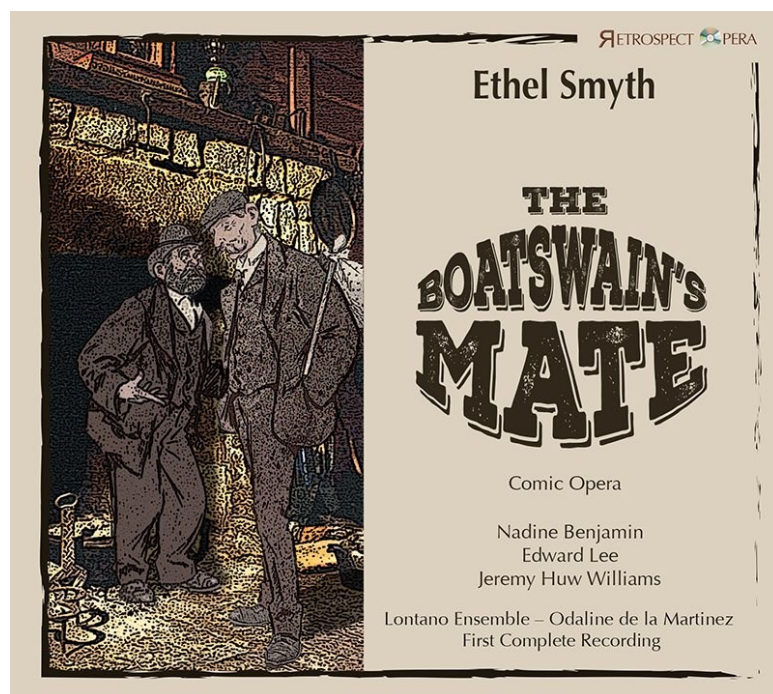


The Past Meets the Present



Excerpts from Dame Ethel Smyth's popular opera "The Boatswain's Mate" were first recorded by HMV in 1917. In 2016, Retrospect Opera issued a complete recording under the direction of Odaline de la Martinez. In 1922, music critic Marion Scott interviewed Dame Ethel about the opera. To order the recording, visit:

http://www.retrospectopera.org.uk/CD_Sales.html

History of "The Boatswain's Mate" Is Told by Dame Ethel Smyth

"Of Persons One Would Wish to Have Seen" -- such is the title Hazlitt bestowed on one of his most genial essays, but among all the reasons for the wish advanced in it he omitted to mention that which is perhaps the pleasantest when approaching a celebrity -- a feeling that the interview is an enrichment and continuation of a long-standing, one-sided acquaintance. Artists have many friends of whom they have never heard. Dame Ethel Smyth must have them all around the world. One can imagine how keenly they would enjoy the opportunity of an interview with her. It was just such an opportunity which came to a music correspondent of *The Christian Science Monitor* a day or two after the great success of "The Boatswain's Mate," Dame Ethel Smyth's opera, at the "Old Vic" in London.

True, the interview had been sought before, but the interviewer, knowing something of the unremitting toil that goes to make an operatic production, had not been surprised at receiving no reply. Then, on a snowy April morning, silence was suddenly broken by the pealing of a telephone bell:

A Napoleonic Touch

"Dame Ethel Smyth speaking -- only opened my letters today -- could see you now."

There was something Napoleonic about this. On went the receiver, off went the interviewer, and a short while later was ringing at the door of a magnificent old mansion within the precincts of St. James's. Here the composer had been staying to superintend the rehearsals at the "Old Vic." The thing might stand as a symbol of democracy and Dame Ethel Smyth herself -- of the long tradition of intellectual culture behind the artist intent on pursuing and presenting reality.

"Pull up a chair, sit over the fire, and then we can talk," she said. Conversation instantly plunged into "The Boatswain's Mate."

Here the interviewer felt a Dictaphone would have been a useful comrade, but had to fall back on notes, leaving readers to imagine for themselves the crisp, clear phrases in which the composer clothes her thoughts.

Readers of her books will know how, for she talks much as she writes.

Continued

Dame Ethel Smyth and “The Boatswain’s Mate”

The “Old Vic” audiences had been wildly enthusiastic over Dame Ethel Smyth’s work. She returned the compliment:

“That’s a wonderful audience -- the only one in England worth writing for. They never missed a point, and they laughed so at the funny scenes that the action was held up over and over again. I had written the opera to be played straight through -- I believe in that -- but I’m going to depart from my practice for once and go through the score to make places for them to laugh in.”

To Be Repeated in Autumn

This seemed to open a hopeful vista. The interviewer, who had seen the opera, wanted to see it again.

“Is there, then, a likelihood of ‘The Boatswain’s Mate’ being done soon?”



**Composer Dame Ethel Smyth
looking somewhat nautical.**

“It will be done again in the autumn at the ‘Old Vic,’ perhaps elsewhere. This morning’s post has brought me letters from five different quarters asking about performances. I suppose that now people know I have rescored the work for small orchestra, they feel that has brought it within their means.”

Dame Ethel Smyth was warm in her commendation of the performers.

“We could have done with more rehearsals,” she said. “By the last performances things were just beginning to be really smooth, but everything was on the right lines, and everyone had worked together in the most wonderful way to produce the results. Yes, Muriel Gough as Mrs. Waters was good, wasn’t she?”

To questions about the libretto she replied, “I did it myself on a story by Jacobs, which is a capital one. Of course I had to expand the original conversations, but I don’t believe that anyone could tell without the book which sentences are mine and which are Jacobs’. I don’t know myself by now. I added all the lyrics, though.”

People who have seen the opera realize that the thorough way in which the composer-librettist has identified herself with the story is one of the secrets of its success; her strong sense of humor and unspoiled human sympathy have made this rapport possible.

Beethoven Theme Quoted

She revels in the joke of the policeman who appears in part two of “The Boatswain’s Mate.” “He’s my own—I put him in myself,” she said, and in reply to an eager question, wrote out the musical jest that accompanies his entry—a most ingenious quotation from the famous theme in C minor from Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, so to speak, skewed across a passage in E minor, with an enharmonic D sharp equaling B flat as the link.

Said the interviewer, “I heard it at the performance, but it went by so rapidly I could not spot all the details.”

“A musical joke is like a bad pun—it should go by lightly—one mustn’t press the point,” was the rejoinder.

Further questions remained to be asked about the history of “The Boatswain’s Mate” and future work. The following facts were told in reply:

Dame Ethel Smyth spent the winter of 1913-14 in Egypt. There the “Boatswain’s Mate” was written, though not orchestrated. On her way back she stopped in Vienna (May 1914) where a contract was signed with the Opera House at Frankfurt-am-Main for the first production of the work on March 15, 1915. Meanwhile she had

Dame Ethel Smyth and "The Boatswain's Mate"

also signed a contract with the Opera House at Munich for a production of her earlier opera, "The Wreckers," on Feb. 22, 1915 ("Ah! 'The Wreckers,'" she said, "that is the best thing I ever wrote.") Thus two operas of hers would have been running concurrently at leading European opera houses. The war came and cut straight through this bright prospect.

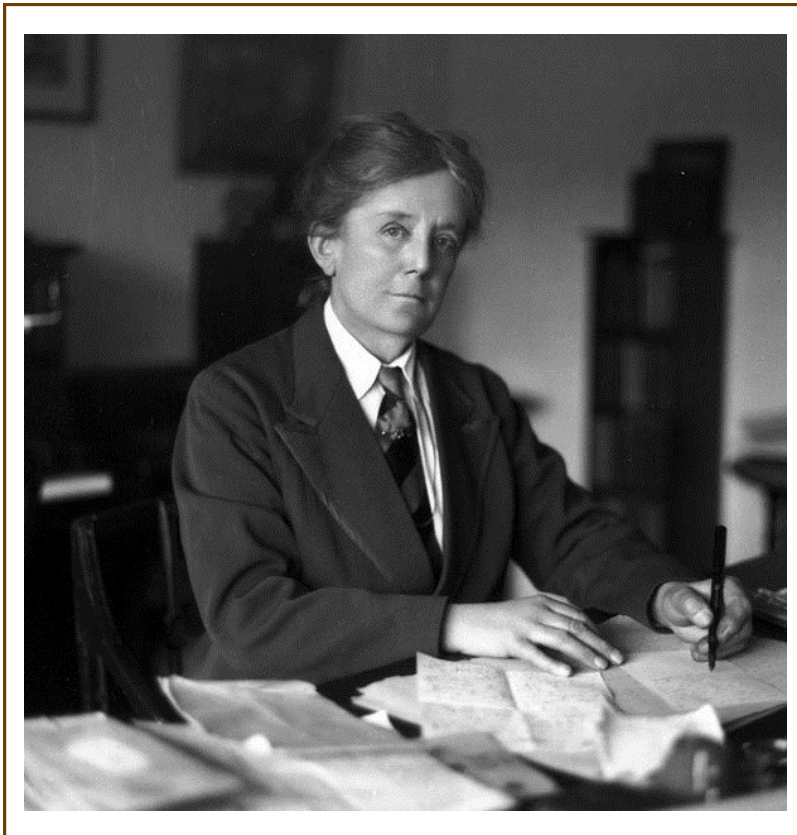
English Productions

Later on, "The Wreckers" and "The Boatswain's Mate" were produced by Sir Thomas Beecham in England, but the conditions were not altogether satisfactory. "Imagine taking three-quarters of an hour in the middle of 'The Boatswain' to set the scene inside Mrs. Water's cottage," exclaimed the energetic composer. Comparatively short and essentially a brisk work, "The Boatswain's Mate" must go through without delays. Done thus, it is under the usual length, and requires another opera with it. "Cavalleria Rusticana" is at present the only one that "fills the bill," but it is not particularly suitable.

So Dame Ethel Smyth is now writing a short piece on purpose to go in front of "The Boatswain's Mate." It is to be called "Fête Galante -- A Dance Dream," founded on a story by Maurice Baring. The composer has prepared her own scenario, which she has given over to Edward Shanks, the poet (and sub-editor of *The London Mercury*), who is doing the libretto. This work is intended to be just the opposite sort of thing to "The Boatswain's Mate." It is very poetical, very tragic, with a kind of dancing going through the whole, is to last between 30 and 45 minutes, is scored for an even smaller orchestra than "The Boatswain's Mate" and is not finished yet.

A glance at the clock—time had fled by. Hurried exclamations on both sides. Composer and interviewer whirled downstairs, cordial talk tangled itself with a quest for taxicabs. In a few moments both were being rushed to their respective destinations through the snow.

Marion M. Scott May 13, 1922
The Christian Science Monitor



The composer at work.

