

The Stormy Petrel
Program Notes by Kathryn Aaron, Artistic Associate

The Chorus of Westerly's performances of the Mass in D by Dame Ethel Smyth will be presented in the original order intended by the composer. Casting aside the familiar structure of the Ordinary of the Mass, the *Gloria*, which typically occurs in response to the first movement of the *Kyrie*, is here moved to the very last movement. Smyth's work is as singular as the life the composer led. Unorthodox, slightly heretical, and utterly engrossing, prepare to be swept away by the ' Sturm und Drang' of a true Romantic.

Ethel grew up in a vigorous and happy household of an upper middle class military family. She was the middle child of eight and the first baby to be born on English soil. The family had recently returned from a military tour in India. Ethel's father began his military career in his youth when he ran off with his brother at age 15 to join the Bengal army. Smyth's mother was profoundly musical both as a singer and pianist with an ear for languages. She was fluent in French, German and Hindustani, having lived in India since her marriage, a love match made while Col. Smyth was on leave in 1848. Both parents were supportive of their unusual daughter even in moments when they did not fully understand her. Theirs was a traditional military household at the height of the Victorian era and the Smyth children enjoyed an idyllic childhood. Smyth herself often likened them to the Swiss Family Robinson. The children jumped horses and raced pony carts. Even as a child, she was a force to be reckoned with and eager to experience it all. At the tender age of six she bribed the gardener to let her witness the dispatching of a pig for dinner, a decision everyone later regretted. At age 12, a governess who had studied at Leipzig Conservatory, Smyth's future alma mater, handed Ethel a copy of Beethoven's sonatas. Although Ethel does not specify, practicality would suggest the young woman would have been comfortable parting with a copy of his works for piano such as the *Pathétique* or the *Moonlight Sonata*. Her passion for Beethoven will be unwavering for the rest of her life.

The years leading up to her composition of the Mass in D had been some of the most trying of her life. Ever since she left home in 1877 to attend the Leipzig Conservatory, Smyth made an effort to return Frimhurst homestead to summer with the family for a spell before returning to Germany for the concert season. After hearing a string quartet of hers in 1889, Ethel Smyth was introduced to the famed conductor of the Crystal Palace, Augustus Manns, who immediately pressed her to write for orchestra. Having met with Tchaikovsky several times while studying in Leipzig, the older composer often imparted to her that the mastery of orchestration was the ultimate expression of a great composer. Manns's commission was gasoline on the compositional fire. But the work would have to wait. The summer visit home of that same year had proved especially difficult. Her mother was almost completely deaf and somewhat unaware of the change in her abilities. Smyth's mother understood her the best, and to lose the nuance of private conversation had drastically changed the dynamic between mother and her "stormy petrel", as she lovingly called Ethel. The scene at Frimhurst was always chaotic with grandchildren arriving on a regular schedule but Ethel found it impossible to work even with several pianos at her disposal. She fled to Germany in hopes of continuing to write.

For the better part of a decade Smyth had maintained a consistent pattern of migration from Frimhurst to Leipzig, but this year she traveled to Munich. The change in itinerary was partly a desire to fall in with the opera crowd but also to avoid any possible run-ins with her old Leipzig crowd. Suffering a broken heart of the most complicated kind, Ethel had fled to Munich for succor and to write an opera, but fate had a different plan. Upon her arrival in Munich in the

early fall of 1890 Smyth had been keeping company with the Trevelyan family, an unusually liberal, upper class English family in need of 'good English company abroad.' The Mass in D is lovingly dedicated to the eldest daughter of the family, Pauline. When the Trevelyans quit Munich for Cannes, Ethel, a frequent overnight guest with the family, found herself turned out of her rented lodgings once it was discovered she was a single woman attempting to rent. Ethel lived in this cycle of pernicious landlords providing her with the coldest and worst of rooms in any house she attempted to lease. With each new address came the same excuse- no one in Munich may rent to a single woman for she must be of ill repute.

As the Christmas holidays bore down, Ethel found herself bedridden with illness on the first floor of a house, already served with an eviction notice to leave by the end of the week. This was a new low. Having collapsed from exhaustion before in Leipzig, Ethel feared for her life. It was time to go home to Frimhurst. Armed with Pauline Trevelyan's personal copy of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation de Christ*, a large packet of chopped beef, her beloved Saint Bernard named Marco, and the memory of one of the best performances of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* she had ever heard, Smyth made the trip home leaning against the luggage compartment feeding pieces of steak to the enormous dog under the locked door, delirious with fever, insensible to how she completed the subsequent legs of the journey. Frimhurst helped restore Ethel to good health and soon she was composing again, having already written the solos for both the *Benedictus* and *Sanctus*. It was a rare period of peace in the Smyth household. Ethel and her mother were on excellent terms, having found a domestic rhythm that suited all. Tragically, by January of 1891 her mother would pass suddenly from a brief illness that neither she nor her father would ever quite forgive themselves of their handling.

With barely time to think, Ethel Smyth was whisked away to the hushed paradise of Cap Martin, as she called it, on the French Riviera, as part of the Empress Eugenie's entourage and there amongst the jet set, she composed the bulk of the Mass as we know it today. The Empress (widow to Napoleon III), having witnessed the compositional genesis, was emotionally as well as financially invested in the Mass's success and with the offer of her royal presence at the premiere all but guaranteed a firm commitment from Royal Albert Hall. Queen Victoria was also a supporter when made privy to the work by Lady Ponsonby, her first lady in waiting. In a somewhat contrived circumstance on a rainy afternoon at Balmoral, Queen Victoria's open barouche stopped outside Lady Ponsonby's house on the estate, as it often did for respite when the weather turned. Ethel just happened to be at hand to provide musical comfort to Her Majesty when the Queen bade her sing through the *Benedictus* and *Sanctus* solos which Lady Ponsonby had assured her were of astonishing quality. Her work and her singing found favor with 'the dear Queen' as she was always referred to by Lady Ponsonby. An invitation was immediately extended to the main house for the following week for Ethel to repeat the beautiful German songs which reminded Queen Victoria so well of Prince Albert, as well as a more complete rendering of her Mass. "*I cannot remember what numbers I chose, but the Sanctus must have been one of them, for in it is a D trumpet which I remember sang out astonishingly in that superbly acoustic drawing-room...And now, emboldened by the sonority of the place, I did the Gloria – the most tempestuous, and, I thought, the best number of all. At a certain drum effect a foot, even, came into play, and I fancy that as regards volume of sound at least, the presence of a real chorus and orchestra was scarcely missed!*"

The *Kyrie* opens with bass voices doubled by a hushed choir of low strings in a chant like cantus firmus. The opening motive, a stepwise motion that flowers into a descending tritone that leads you unsteadily back to tonic that simmers in an unsettling D minor, a sonic sign of the cross that somehow will stir itself into a swirling tempest in the *Christe eleison*. This lushly

orchestrated violence melts into a haunting flute solo. All at once we are in the garden of Eden, a new Adam and a new Eve peeking around the corner only to see Mary already kneeling at the tomb. There is a raw power of the first movement with such a wealth of text painting and thematic material one almost feels bamboozled upon first listening. According to Smyth, "*The only other unofficial comment I recall is that of Archbishop Benson [Canterbury], who overhearing bits of it... remarked afterwards that in this Mass, God was not implored but commanded to have mercy.*"

The *Credo* delivers statements of belief in a gloriously militaristic fashion and a solo quartet so tender it would make Verdi weep and all in our first taste of the key of D major. The dramatic shift to G-minor on the text '*Crucifixus*' with its hauntingly syncopated and highly chromatic melody is a theme you will find glimmers throughout the entire work. Perhaps her most "English" sounding section is the '*Et vitam venturi saeculi*' in which the brass are allowed their fullest expression. An avid horse rider and hunter, it is hard not to hear the thrill of the horses galloping over the downs after a pack of smart dogs more than once in this work. From the moment she wrote it, there was no doubt in her mind that the *Gloria* was the best movement. Liturgical function, never the impetus, was humbled to the needs of musical expression at every opportunity. Opening with a clear hunter's call, Smyth's use of brass and percussion throughout the mass will surprise and delight but the *Gloria* in particular shows her deft ability to orchestrate.

Smyth's compositional voice was as clear and as brilliant as her own singing voice of which we might get some sense of with the haunting mezzo solo in the *Sanctus* and the ever upward arching melody of the *Benedictus*, the two movements she sang for Queen Victoria on a rainy afternoon in the Scottish Highlands. After hearing the first rehearsal with the full orchestra Smyth completely rescored the entire *Sanctus* movement overnight before the next rehearsal to balance the low brass just right with the highly unusual use of a contralto soloist. Her *Agnus Dei*, punctuated throughout by an operatic tenor solo, takes the chromatic syncopated theme from the '*Crucifixus*' portion of the *Credo* into the pleas of 'miserere nobis' only to be answered with a beautiful modern chant of 'dona nobis pacem', grant us peace. This Wagner-like suspension of time, sublime in its stillness, is immediately dashed like a chariot into the sea by the frolicking opening of the *Gloria*. Smyth's harmonic progressions and stylistic manipulation of the material is as sure as her dramatic pacing. You will easily forgive the mild heresy of moving this movement out of order once you hear the end.

In addition to music, Smyth was an excellent writer and a diarist on par with Samuel Peppys and Ned Rorem. She captured in minute detail what life was like in nineteenth century England and Germany. It is in her own words she describes the harrowing ordeal of coming to Munich, falling gravely ill, and reading Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation de Christ* cover to cover as her only form of comfort as she figured out how to get home from Germany in that harsh winter of 1890. She freely admits that once the Mass was completed the religiosity that had so gripped her released her just as easily. The summer before her mother passed, she regularly spent afternoons with the wife of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Mrs. Benson, and would continue to do so long after the premiere as she did with the Trevelyans, a devout Catholic family. While some historians view this phase of composition as evidence of a brief religious conversion it is hard to view it as such when she neither converts to Catholicism or take up any sort of new devotional routine nor does she break off friendships with those whose religious fervor she did not share. Perhaps an expression of salvation but more importantly it is a moment of total metamorphosis. She would never write another mass. The Mass in D, both her first major orchestral and major choral work,

but more specifically it marks the beginning of her life as a professional orchestral and operatic composer.

Smyth's operas are considered the most important contribution to the art form for England since Purcell, a fact rarely taught in any music history class. In 1903, Dame Smyth was the first female opera composer to have a work premiered at the Metropolitan Opera. The company would not program another female opera composer until 2016. Despite all this groundbreaking achievement, instead of becoming part of the classical canon, her major works have fallen into the dustbin of history. Accused of trying to write like a man by the academic establishment, of not being feminine or open enough by her own sex, or of shirking her societal duty to marry and bear children altogether, Smyth could only do one thing: be herself. Her entire catalogue, thanks to a number of groundbreaking recordings in the past five years, is now enjoying a much-deserved renaissance. Just this past March there was a discovery of an original autograph score of the Mass in D in Smyth's own hand at the University of Liverpool brimming with the composer's notes and corrections, a gift in 1924 to the conductor Sir Adrian Boult in thanks for a revival performance of the work at Royal Albert Hall. Demanding and nuanced, today's performance brings us all into communion with the next generation of musicians and audience members that will carry her legacy forward