

The Performance of Gender and the Woman Composer

"There were many occasions on which the interloper deliberately queered her own pitch; for instance, by leaving the field of action in order to devote two years to the cause of Women's Suffrage at that critical moment of a musician's career when headway is being made at last. . . . Meanwhile it amuses me to think that someday after my death, when all traces of sex have been reduced to ashes . . . someone will very likely take me up as a stunt" (Smyth 1987: 360-61).

This paper will question Judith Butler's discussion in Gender Trouble of the subversive possibilities of gender performance by focusing on the differences between private versus public performance of gender in the life of Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), a turn of the century British woman composer. I draw the idea of the performativity of gender from Butler, who states that gender is created by a stylized repetition of acts through time, and is therefore subject to transformation through moments of disruption. Butler proposes that the confusion of anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance can point up the problems inherent in the model, thereby "unnaturalizing" it and changing it.

I propose that to intentionally perform gender subversively in a professional sphere highlights gender to the extent that the personality becomes the main focus of critical attention, not the artistic or intellectual production. Although the intent is to break down categories, I propose that initially it reinforces them. It may be that the accumulation of subversive performances can break down categories, but at what cost to the performer? It may be asking too much of those who are already marginalized, already struggling, to bear the brunt of it.

I chose to examine Smyth because she was a professional woman composer at a time when composing was considered man's work. In addition, she wrote nine books--memoirs, essays, descriptions of travel or people--from which I can draw on to examine her own perceptions. Although I do not have access to all nine books, I have access to a good amount of her writings. I will begin with a general overview of the social, cultural forces that shaped her and of the gender conventions she crossed in relation to her time. I will focus both on her private performance of gender, by which I mean sexuality, personality, hobbies, etc., and her public performance of gender, by which I mean her choice and pursuit of a professional career in a field defined as "masculine." I will then look at how she was perceived by her peers, by contemporary writers, and finally at her self-evaluation near the end of her long life.

Ethel Smyth in the Context of Her Culture

As has been discussed in Hyde (1984) and White (1951), England in the late 19th century and early 20th century imported music from France or Italy rather than drawing on the resources of its own composers. England had never developed an operatic tradition, and was particularly interested in French opera during this period. Although professional musical training was available in England, it was not as good as what was available on the Continent. Those who had trained in England formed a clique which had a great deal of influence in determining what was performed. Musicians were generally held in contempt by middle class society; male musicians were assumed to be homosexual and female musicians were considered little better than prostitutes. All musicians were perceived as being of loose moral character.

Middle class Englishwomen received a smattering of education, usually completing their training with a stint at boarding schools. As Bernstein (1986) and Citron (1991) point out, any social class that could afford it provided their daughters with amateur musical training to make

them more desirable marriage partners; however, they were deterred from being professional performers by the stigma attached to it. Those few Englishwomen who attempted composition were restricted to writing parlor music because of their lack of training and the lack of a venue in which to present other kinds of music. The only respectable musical career for women was that of music teacher.

Smyth was operating against all these conventions. She comments in *Impressions That Remained* that her bourgeois military father thought the word artist "simply meant people who are out to break the Ten Commandments" (Smyth 1981: 109). She had to lock herself in her room for a month before he allowed her to begin her music studies at the age of nineteen. She wrote large-scale dramatic works, including six operas, and had to teach herself orchestration because that type of instruction was not available to women. Smyth went to concerts alone at a time when a woman alone in public was considered fair game for sexual harassment; at times she dressed as an old woman so as not to attract unwanted attention. Because she was operating outside cultural conventions, she was forced out of lodgings in Munich; it was assumed that she was a prostitute since she did not have servants and had not rented an apartment (Smyth 1987: 155). As an English composer who trained in Leipzig, she was caught between the two nations during a period in which political strife between the two nations recurred every few years. Because of her foreign training she was not accepted into the composers' clique in Britain.

Smyth was capable of using the novelty of her gender to get performances, but she never lost sight of the fact that she was, by reason of her sex, excluded from the "old boy's network" that controlled the English concert hall. Yet she was able to use her personal relationships with the Princess Eugenie and the British Royal Family to get performances unavailable to other British composers at the time (Hyde 1984: 138-165). Her opera *Der Wald* became the first opera by a woman composer to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 1902. During the 1920's she became internationally known as conductor of her own works. In 1922 she was made a Dame of the British Empire.

She also challenged gender roles in her personal behavior. Contemporary descriptions of Smyth focus on her "masculine" behavior, including references to her clothes, the cigars she smoked, the way she cursed like a man, and her avid sportswomanship (Collis 1984: 103; St. John 1959: 91). She was a pioneering bicyclist soon after bicycles were invented. Smyth had a long string of homosexual relationships, many of which "passed" as friendships at the time when many believed that women did not have sexual desires; Queen Victoria, often her patron, did not believe in the existence of female homosexuals (Wood 1983: 127). Smyth had a longtime relationship with the writer Harry Brewster, which resulted in one sexual encounter, which she arranged as she approached her 40th year because of a "vague wish not to end my life as . . . a 'Stonehenge Virgin'" (Smyth 1987:214). She writes of how shocked some of her friends were by the calculated manner in which she arranged it--it would have been more excusable if she had been carried away by the moment (Ibid: 215). Just when she was finally establishing a career in England, she dropped everything to devote two years to the Women's Suffrage Movement (1911-13), and spent several weeks in jail for throwing a brick through a cabinet minister's window.

It is interesting to compare biographies of Smyth, especially in terms of gender roles and passing. All the writers describe her as being "masculine." Not all are willing to accept her bisexuality. Some, such as Collis (1984) write of her as being a sexually repressed woman all of whose relationships were platonic and who channelled her repressed sexual energy into intense friendships. Others, such as Wood (1993, 1987) interpret her music in relation to her lesbianism. Generally her biographers agree that early in life she chose love objects that would not reciprocate

physically because of their moral convictions or marital status. Some, such as Wood (1993: 171) think that her relationship with Brewster was platonic except for that one occasion; others say that it continued as a sexual relationship afterwards. I found it interesting that in some sense she is still "passing" as straight in that it is possible for biographers to minimize her bisexuality.

Several writers, such as Heilbrun (1979) and Block (1984), have suggested processes through which women have become successful in traditionally male fields. Among the most commonly suggested processes are the experience of being in some kind of all-girl environment; playing the role of "son" to the father; and having a sense of the mother as representing a destiny to be avoided. All three factors are present in the case of Ethel Smyth. She perceived her mother as being an unstable, thwarted individual; a woman of great natural intelligence and talent who had been forced by convention to a life not suited to her. Smyth modeled herself after her father as a sportswoman, and he was clearly proud of her physical athleticism. Even though she had to fight with him over her vocation, she had a great deal of respect for him throughout her life. During her years in boarding school, she kept a book listing all of the girls with whom she fell in love, and began the series of intense friendships with females she would have throughout her life. Throughout her life, most of her supporters, financial and emotional, were women.

Sexual Aesthetics and the Woman Composer

Studies of the concept of genius, such as Battersby (1989), have shown that it is a male category, although the male element is unmarked and therefore invisible. In the late 19th century, many reasons were given for women's inability to possess creative genius. They generally come back to the idea that women do not have the necessary intellect--the "masculine" intellect--necessary to organize their intuitions into masterful and enduring art. Around the same period, gendered criticism of music became very popular. Music was analyzed in terms of its masculine elements--aggressively rhythmic, goal-oriented, large-scale orchestral and dramatic works--versus feminine elements--nonfunctional harmonies, lyrical, small-scale chamber works. The use of gendered language to describe music combined with the masculine concept of genius led to differential criticism of music by male or female composers. It became possible to dismiss "feminine" music by women as being insubstantial while at the same time dismissing "masculine" music by women as being an attempt at "being" male and therefore equally unacceptable. The "feminine" or "masculine" qualities found in music by male composers could be praised because the "feminine" elements were perceived as being controlled by the "masculine" intellect, while the "masculine" qualities were themselves what made the music inherently masterful.

Smyth was frequently reviewed in these terms. Her violin sonata, performed in Leipzig in 1887, was pronounced "deficient in the feminine charm that might have been expected of a woman composer" (St. John 1959: 54). An early piece for orchestra, premiered under the name "E.M. Smyth" was lauded as masculine and masterful until it was learned that "E.M." was "Ethel Mary," at which point it was reinterpreted as an attempt to write music like a man. Praise of her *Mass*, which premiered in 1893, compliments its masterful construction, its virility, the richness of its orchestration--at the same time mentioning "The most striking thing about it is the entire absence of the qualities that are usually associated with feminine productions" (Ibid: 86). By the end of her life, her music was rarely performed and there have been few revivals, even though she was the first significant English opera composer since Purcell. She is a clear forerunner to Benjamin Britten; her opera *The Wreckers* and his *Peter Grimes* both incorporate the sea as a character with music that suggests the different moods of the sea. There are no available commercial recordings

of any of the operas. The Mass has only recently been released on CD (Virgin Classics VC 7 911882).

Smyth was a highly visible personality. Unfortunately, attention has been focussed most intensely on her private and personal behavior rather than her music. Some of the attention drawn by her behavior led to her personality being appropriated as a character in two novels. E.F. Benson, in his novel Dodo (published 1893), writes a vicious satire of the "sporting woman composer" in the person of Edith Staines. Smyth had a long-standing, intense friendship--described by several writers as a courtship--with his mother and sister. His father, E.W. Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury, couldn't stand the sight of her so she had to be snuck in through the kitchen door. The character Staines is clearly modelled on Smyth--she smokes cigars, she goes out hunting with the men; she swears and talks too loudly; she orates about what kinds of breakfast foods are suitable for putting her in the mood to compose what kinds of music; and has a long string of lovers (although Benson writes them as male lovers) whom she tires of quickly. The Archbishop himself thought the portrayal overly vicious, and Smyth writes that he actually sat through a whole dinner in her presence as an apology for his son's behavior (Collis 1984: 179).

Virginia Woolf, with whom she was friends for the last ten years of Woolf's life, had conflicting feelings about her. She modeled Miss La Trobe in Between the Acts (1941) on Smyth (Wood 1987: 499). The novel presents her as a lesbian, an outcast in some ways, but also as a passionate artist who is willing to take risks to try to achieve her vision. She is very much in control of the situation and understands how to hold the audience. The outdoor setting of the play echoes Smyth's *Fete Galant* (1922), which is also set in a garden. Even the physical description matches Smyth. In the end, La Trobe hasn't "made them see," but she has made a grand and brave effort.

Woolf praises Smyth for opening the doors for women in the future, comparing her to a wrecker (one opera was based on a Cornish community of Wreckers):

"She drew the enemy's fire and left behind her a pathway. . . . She smashed, and broke, and toiled, and drew upon herself hostility and ridicule in order that it might not be wicked . . . or disgraceful for women now . . . who come after her" (Wood 1983: 125, final draft of speech given 1/21/31).

She did not, however, know how to judge her as a composer, and often found her personality overwhelming. Woolf encouraged her prose writing, and Smyth wrote six of her books during their decade-long friendship.

Passing or Subversion?

In many ways Smyth's memoirs can be read as a captivity narrative of her displacement in social, cultural and sexual terms. She is clearly aware of her ambiguous position as a lesbian at a time in which it was beginning to be perceived as a psychological abnormality, and writes around her female friendships in such a way as to "pass" as heterosexual. It is only in private letters that it becomes clear that the relationships were indeed sexual.

In the early part of her career she seemed to want most of all to "pass" as a male composer. Although she usually used her full name, she seems to have tried to offset her female gender by her masculine behavior--coded as nonsexual because "invisible" for a composer. But she was always aware of herself as a pioneer:

"I feel I must fight for *Der Wald* because I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put out to sea. Now I am neither afraid nor a pauper, and in my way I am an explorer who believes supremely in this bit of pioneering" (White 1951:129).

After her experience with the Women's Suffrage movement, she became adamant about her femaleness, and castigated conductors who refused to schedule her pieces as being sexist. Her experiences as a Suffragist also affected the kinds of women characters she wrote in her operas. I believe that she used these characters as a way to struggle with her own questions about feminine identity. She deals with the issue of female sexuality in *The Wreckers*, and creates a modern independent woman in *The Boatswain's Mate*. Even her choice of voice types is significant. She frequently pairs rich mezzo voices with high tenor voices instead of the more conventional soprano/tenor pairing, and thereby overweighs the male lead with the female voice. The women characters often have more power, more intelligence than the men, especially in her later operas.

At the end of her life Smyth writes about the lack of hearing for her music,

"Because I have conducted my own operas and love sheepdogs; because I generally dress in tweeds, and sometimes, at winter afternoon concerts, have even conducted them; because I was a militant Suffragette and seized a chance of bearing time to *The March of the Women* from the window of my cell in Holloway Prison with a toothbrush; because I have written books, spoken speeches, broadcast, and don't always make sure that my hat is on straight; for these and other equally pertinent reasons, in a certain sense I am well known. . . This is celebrity indeed!--or shall we say notoriety?--but it does not alter the fact that after having been on the job, so to speak, for over forty years, I have never succeeded in becoming even a tiny wheel in the English music machine; not did this fantastic latter-day notoriety even pave the way to inclusion in programme schemes!" (Smyth 1987: 355-356)

Conclusion

Smyth performed her gender as "masculine" with a female body through her choice of career and her style of behavior. What is remembered are her eccentricities, not her music, which was the main reason for her struggle. Her art became invisible, masked by her performance of gender, while the public gaze remained on her personality. And the cost to Smyth was high; her music never received the attention it was due. She never got over being deeply wounded by Benson's caricature, and her friendship with Woolf was almost destroyed forty years later by a joking letter Woolf sent that brought Smyth to believe Woolf shared Benson's view of her.

The invisible, unmarked "maleness" of the category "composer" has become visible only because of the creation of the opposing category, "woman composer," in which what is most visible is gender, not artistic production. It may be, as Woolf suggests, that the path has been opened for future women composers, but this is only in that the presence of a highly visible historical woman composer may allow a young woman to imagine the career. Unfortunately, the gendered nature of the category of "woman" composer has not solved the problem of the unmarked category of "male" composer. Perhaps making the binary more visible is a beginning step toward unnaturalizing and dismantling it (as in Anzaldúa's book), but the short-term result is to increase awareness of sexual gender, not to create a multiplicity of categories. And in the case of gender performance, the immediate result is harmful to the performer, who is already struggling from a marginalized position.

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