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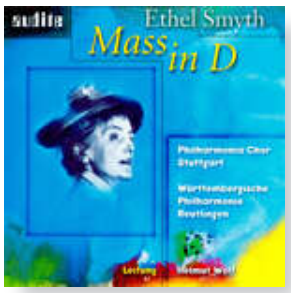

Ethel Smyth: Mass in D

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American Record Guide (Koob - 2003.11.01)

Victorian England produced no more colorful and controversial woman than Ethel Smyth (1858 – 1944). Not only was she a wonderful composer, but a resolute political advocate who even suffered brief imprisonment for her activities as a suffragette. Her various and passionate romantic attachments to other brilliant and creative women – including Virginia Woolf – are well documented. Her notoriety notwithstanding, she was eventually accorded her well-deserved status as Dame of the British Empire.

Not one to suffer fools gladly, she could hold her own with the most chauvinistic men of her era. Even such a remarkable character (and critic) as George Bernard Shaw held her and her music in high esteem, treating her like “one of the boys” in their correspondence. To his own credit, he credited her with “curing me forever of the old delusion that women could not do men’s work in art or other things”. He went so far as to thank her, in the same letter, for “bullying” him into going to hear this wondrous mass, and asserting that her music was “more masculine than Handel’s”.

Indeed, this is forthright and original music of great virility. As I’ve heard only a scattering of her piano and chamber music, the intensity and unbridled spiritual power of this premiere recording came as quite a surprise to me. Dame Ethel is quoted in the excellent notes as having put “all there was in my heart” into it when she wrote it in 1890 – the final fruit of her early conventional faith, stemming from her high-church Anglican upbringing. Then she went to say, “but no sooner was it finished than…orthodox belief fell away from me, never to return”.

The music, scored for the usual soloists with mixed choir and orchestra, sets the usual propers of the Latin mass. The originality of her writing consistently transcends the apparent influences of her romantic-era forbears. She knew how to write effectively for both a large chorus and orchestra and worked her ravishing solo lines into the musical fabric most beautifully.

The urgent, driven Kyrie is leavened by moments of melting lyricism. Although the Gloria came next in the original score, it is here saved (in accordance with the composer’s wishes) until the work’s end, as it was in the two performances the mass was given in her lifetime. Power and passion predominate in most of the succeeding movements as well, though interludes of limpid, melodious serenity supply both contrasts and occasional relief. Only the Benedictus remains consistently low-key and lovely. The mighty Gloria brings this magnificent work to a jubilant, olympic close that would have done Beethoven proud. It left me feeling drained but exalted.

Performances are committed and memorable, with soloists, chorus, and orchestra giving their all in the service of such extraordinary music – probably Smyth’s masterpiece. Sound quality is very good, but texts are lacking.

Shame on the Brits for allowing this blockbuster to languish in obscurity for so long, and – for all their rich choral tradition and accomplishment – suffering German musicians to finally rescue what deserves to be an English national treasure. Take the time to research this amazing lady on-line – you’ll be glad you did. I can imagine

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Smyth's irrepressibly self-confident spirit looking down on this effort with a smug, "I TOLD you it was good" sort of air. You have simply GOT to hear it!

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