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Dame Ethel Smyth and *The Prison*: Gender, Sexuality, and the “Bonds of Self”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Music from The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for [Initial] Honors (Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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May 6, 2021
Composers often draw on various identities and experiences in their work in order to position their compositions within real-world events and their personal lives. This research investigates the use of personal gender and sexuality references in Ethel Smyth’s composition *The Prison*. Smyth’s last major work, *The Prison* (1929-1930), is a choral symphony that follows a dialogue between a Prisoner and his Soul as the Prisoner works to understand his own mortality and accept death. This study explores the question: How does Ethel Smyth use intertextuality, the subversion of expectations, and the idea of the “bonds of self” in *The Prison* to position the work within her gender and sexuality experiences? A focus is placed on the sociolinguistic notions of identity and desire, seeking to discover how the combination of homosexuality and female gender influence the work. Through this research and analysis, I hope to demonstrate that *The Prison* culminated and responded to a range of Ethel Smyth’s experiences with gender and sexuality, including elements of discrimination and activism. Smyth uses intertextuality, the subversion of expectations, and the “bonds of self” to depict lesbian desire and her identity as a female composer in *The Prison*.

**Gender & Music**

Across disciplines, the idea of gender provides a lens for incredibly diverse, complex, and varied research. This study aims to view gender in terms of Judith Butler’s notion of *performativity*, where gender is not an unconscious fact, but a conscious decision by the performer. Butler notes that, in terms of gender as a performed identity, “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.”\(^1\) How does Smyth perform her gender identity? How is this

performance of gender influenced by larger ideologies? How does her experience with this identity shape her music?

Gender, here, is studied in the binary of the culture in which it was performed. Though this research discusses gender as an identity, it does not aim to gender Smyth’s music, but rather to focus on the role of gender ideologies and how historical gendering affected the music. In previous studies, Judith Tick notes that “the extent to which each composer felt burdened by gender ideology varied considerably, but none of them was indifferent or unaffected, particularly in the reception of their music.” Female composers were historically negatively affected by these ideologies to a larger extent than their male counterparts.

Marcia Citron studies the lack of women in the anthologies and ideas of the musical canon. Factors like education, publication, number of performances, and public reception allow music to become well-known and respected. Even when more women were educated in music and composition, the lack of access to professional circles and biases of publishing companies created immediate boundaries. As restrictions lessened, systematic biases and prevailing gender ideologies continued to limit women’s access to a place in the musical canon. Many studies draw on Smyth as an important case study for the field. Recent studies of her legacy in the field of women and music both reflect these realities and aim to improve the field for future women.

Women in music during Smyth’s time were still overlooked and systematically kept from achieving a place in the musical canon. Though women were more recognized as performers, their role as composer was challenged by society. In 1880, George Upton, an American music critic, wrote a book titled *Woman in Music* which highlighted the roles of women as creators, muses, and interpreters of music. In terms of women creating music, Upton describes the reasons

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why women have failed in composition, including innate inabilities, heightened emotions, and inability “to endure the discouragements of the composer.” Women were ironically marked as both lacking the proper emotion and possessing too much emotion for the task.

Even as society progressed, double standards remained. Music written by women was said to contain a feminine quality, inferior to the masculine qualities of male composers. These labels, however, were not bound to gender identities at the time. While male composers were able to possess both feminine and masculine traits in their work, female composers like Smyth were often criticized when portraying features of masculine music. Society’s lack of a fluid musical gender expression for female composers forms an interesting basis for analysis of Smyth’s works. Could the use of certain masculine forms and techniques, in conjunction with the feminine, be a political statement about gender equality? This idea presents a notion of gender fluidity within the music, itself.

Much of the gender work during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century concerns the British Women’s Suffrage Movement. Smyth was involved with the Suffragettes and took off two years from the music sphere to work with the Movement. This Movement, for many including Smyth, translated into militant Suffragette work. The slogan “Deeds not Words” permeated their ideologies; they were intent on creating chaos in order to get their voices heard. Many of them were arrested for these actions. The descriptions of prison, hunger strikes, forced feeding, and continued barbaric practices against them are striking.

The radical feminist press often overlooked female composers and regarded the arts as separate from the struggles of the political sphere. Even the more moderate feminist press that was more likely to refer to women composers tended to portray certain composers as

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“exceptional” rather than “exemplary.” Composers, or other professionals, that were not active in the Movement were criticized for not recognizing the Movement and their privilege. Smyth was one of the more favored composers, as she was embraced by the Suffragettes for her activism.

**Gender & Sexuality & Music**

An ongoing debate in the field of language and sexuality deals with the distinction between *identity* versus *desire*. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall have long argued towards the notion that language and sexuality research should be oriented around identity. Seemingly conversely, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick argue that desire is the main approach for sexuality. While Bucholtz and Hall believe that there is a connection to desire, they do not feel that sexuality is as much about eroticism. Instead, they claim that there is a close relationship between identity and desire that is largely represented in practices and ideologies pertaining to sexuality. While I agree with Bucholtz and Hall’s perspective from a contemporary standpoint, the historical perspective on this study requires a nuanced stance. Rather than viewing sexuality as an *identity*, I will focus more on sexuality in terms of Smyth’s *desire*. When examining the historical record, homosexual identity is difficult to pinpoint and address due to changes in language use as well as cultural and social norms surrounding homosexuality over time.

Academic studies of sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries note the importance of homoeroticism in both male and female friendships. Extremely close female friendships were very common. The term “lesbian” was not widely used until the mid-twentieth century.

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century because the language favored the term “friendship” with heavy same-sex relationship connotations. These relationships could be sexual but could also be deep emotional connections. Many of these friendships were more common for those with higher socio-economic status; those who could avoid social conformities. There were still scandals, as when Oscar Wilde was outed or when books such as The Well of Loneliness were labeled as obscene.

In general, many studies of music and sexuality over time look into protest and activism, internalization of oppression, and the idea of “the closet.” Much of the conversation about sexuality and music has to do with gender, as well. Adopting masculine traits in feminine music could be associated with homosexuality due to stereotypes of lesbians wearing “men’s clothing.” The widespread belief in the medical field was that “lesbianism led to masturbation, nymphomania, feeling superior to men, or being a suffragist.” Lesbians were not seen as a large threat to societal values, as opposed to opinions on gay men at the time. However, they were still seen as “unnatural.” Descriptions of lesbian “behavior” noted women dressing in masculine clothing and taking the “sexual place” of the man. Thus, lesbians before the second half of the twentieth century were associated with gender subversion. This carried over into the critiques and creation of music, as well.

Perhaps it is then not surprising that there were many lesbians in the Suffrage Movement. Ethel Smyth was certainly not the only one. Recently, diaries and correspondences have been found that confirm relationships between women like Mary Blathwayt, Annie Kenney, and even Christabel Pankhurst. While their activism in this Movement was not fighting for their rights as lesbians, the fight for women’s rights affected their possibilities for relationships, friendships, and autonomy.

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While there is not much current information on Sapphic composers during Smyth’s time, many of the female composers did not marry, choosing to have a successful career rather than conforming to the societal expectations of women starting families. Relationships with other women did not have the same patriarchal expectations and gave them the opportunities to continue their compositional work. Even so, the gender discrepancies were still very apparent, and some lesbian female composers chose to use pseudonyms or their initials in their work. This is described by Sophie Fuller as a form of “creative androgyny that mirrors their physical androgyne.” This “creative androgyny” could also be seen in their use of both feminine and masculine musical aesthetics.

**Smyth’s Writings**

Smyth’s autobiographical works are arguably as well known as her compositions. Reading these memoirs and accounts of her life allows for a glimpse into the personal life and thoughts of the renowned composer, spanning 1858-1944. Much of her personal identity formation in these texts is established in recollections of her childhood. Smyth identifies her childhood self as a “tomboy.” She did not enjoy many of the stereotypical toys and activities for girls, and instead modeled her personality and behaviors after her older brother, Johnny. Very early on, she establishes herself as strong, independent, and against the traditional path of women at the time. During her childhood, she mentions her frequent and many “passions” for the women in her life, saying she “drew up a list of over a hundred girls and women to whom, had [she] been a man, [she] should have proposed.” These passions, of course, continued into her adult life.

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10 Sophie Fuller, “‘Devoted Attention’: Looking for Lesbian Musicians in Fin-de-Siècle Britain,” in *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity*, ed. Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 91.

She was very outspoken about her views regarding women and marriage, writing once to her mother: “Every day I become more and more convinced of the truth of my old axiom, that why no women have become composers is because they have married, and then, very properly, made their husbands and children the first consideration.”12 She was frustrated with the lack of job freedom associated with marriage and family life. As she later writes, the societal biases against female composers followed the same model.

In her writings, Smyth recognized that the idolatry of certain male composers was blocking new and lesser-known composers from having their pieces performed and was stopping England from producing a British musical tradition that many believed it lacked. By systematically blocking women from participating in the musical idiom to the same extent as men, England was missing out on the opportunities of creating and furthering a musical tradition. She remarked that “where instinct is weak and prejudice cultivated as a virtue, a critic’s first and last thought in connection with a woman’s work is her sex.”13 Whether positive or negative, she was clearly frustrated by the constant commentary on her gender.

She did not hide her anger and frustration, but instead used it to her rhetorical strength. The following excerpt describes some of the many double standards she viewed in musical perception.

When will our men rid themselves of this sex-obsession—so graceful in the adolescent, so hideous in old gentlemen at club windows, but, to say the least of it, out of place in art criticism? You see it at its most rampant in connection with music; if a work is too long it is feminine discursiveness (as if men were always brief and to the point, good Heavens!); if snappy and abrupt it is woman’s impatience; but if direct, lucid, and strong, “these are qualities we do not as a rule look for in women.”14

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12 Smyth, Impressions That Remained, 190.
She is clearly passionate and knowledgeable about unmasking this double standard. She uses her voice and her privilege as a more well-known female composer to address these issues. She notes that men often try to cite the lack of female composers in the musical canon as a reason for their inferiority. In response to this, she describes the systematic lack of cultural and societal support for women in music. Still, she recounts how she “felt bitter things about men who thus arrange life for women and then complacently wonder why she is not doing more in music.”\(^ {15}\) This perceived “lack of awareness” by men perhaps relates back to the condescending remarks by critics and society relating her music to her gender. If they do not recognize the inequalities, they will use perceived difference as justification.

Her book *Female Pipings in Eden* largely discusses issues of women in music. The basis of this discussion is a legend of Adam and Eve, as seen in this excerpt.

The legend relates that one afternoon while Adam was asleep, Eve, anticipating the Great God Pan, bored some holes in a hollow reed and began to do what is called ‘pick out a tune.’ Thereupon Adam awoke; ‘Stop that horrible noise,’ he roared, adding, after a pause, ‘besides which, if *any one’s* going to make it, it’s not you but me.’ Here the cuneiform inscription, or palimpsest, or whatever it is rather gives out, but among still decipherable words are ‘unwomanly’... ‘sex-appeal’... and (this almost illegible) ‘L—l—th.’ Whence one gathers that Eve’s refusal to stop the noise drove Adam to set up a second female companion.\(^ {16}\)

Smyth relates her main argument to this story, saying that “if from the very first Eve had been granted a chance of self development, there would have been no furtive hanging about the Tree of Knowledge, no illicit truck with serpents and apples, and of course—this would have been rather sad—no Militant Suffragettes.”\(^ {17}\) According to Jewish mythology, Lilith (here “L—l—th”) was Adam’s first wife, who was formed at the same time of the same clay as Adam. She was later banished and made a demon for viewing herself as equal to Adam and refusing to

\(^ {17}\) Smyth, *Female Pipings in Eden*, 56.
“lie beneath him.” Later, Eve was made out of Adam’s rib. Throughout history there are many references to Lilith in literature, art, music, and more.

Most notably, many refer to Lilith as an icon of later feminist movements. The story that Smyth tells has definite links to this character in its feminist message and ideology, saying that if Eve/Lilith had been able to develop her musical skills, then the sexism and issues of the present would not be there. Perhaps Smyth inserted the issue of “musical equality” into the original “sexual equality” version of the story, meaning for the audience to understand the reference and make this connection. Additionally, there seems to be a connection between the story of Lilith wanting to sexually “be on top” and the early twentieth century equation of this sexual desire with lesbianism and the Suffragettes. These religious and mythological stories provide an interesting and layered basis for her argument.

While Smyth does continue to express a disdain for marriage, there still appear to be two fundamental relationships in her life that relate directly to The Prison. The relationship with Lisl von Herzogenberg, the wife of Smyth’s first composition teacher, is fundamental when Smyth describes the collapse of their relationship as an “event that shaped [her] whole existence.”18 Additionally, when describing the beginning of her relationship with H.B. Brewster, Smyth’s close friend and author of The Prison: A Dialogue, she says “from now onwards our friendship became the pivot of my life.”19 These phrases are very extreme, yet deliberate, especially considering that she wrote them 30-40 years after the events took place.

Smyth’s relationship with Lisl von Herzogenberg was very close for around 7 years. Many historians and musicologists note that their relationship was likely a romantic and/or sexual relationship. When she first introduces Lisl in her memoir, she describes both her looks

19 Smyth, Impressions That Remained, 475.
and personality with the highest esteem and respect, saying “if ever I worshipped a being on
earth it was Lisl.” They relationship was clearly closer than the formality initially expected of
them. Even so, this relationship is also considered a maternal one. The Herzogenbergs did not
have children of their own and Lisl often expressed the joy of having Smyth there as part of the
family. At a time when Smyth was sick, she describes how Lisl nursed her back to health. This
infantilization of herself combined with Lisl often signing her letters from “Your Mother” seems
also to point to a mother-daughter relationship.

In the following excerpt, Smyth describes her feelings regarding her relationships with
women in her life.

Let me say here that all my life, even when after years had brought me the seemingly
unattainable, I have found in women's affection a peculiar understanding, mothering
quality that is a thing apart. Perhaps too I had a foreknowledge of the difficulties that in a
world arranged by man for man's convenience beset the woman who leaves the
traditional path to compete for bread and butter, honours and emoluments—difficulties
honest men are more aware of, perhaps, than she of the sheltered life. I had no theories
about it then but I think I guessed it. Even among the conformists I saw good, brave
women obliged because of their sex to give way before dullness, foolishness, or brutality;
and in natures inclined to side with the handicapped these things kindle sympathy and
admiration. And further it is a fact, as H.B. once remarked, that the people who have
helped me most at difficult moments of my musical career, beginning with my own sister
Mary, have been members of my own sex. Thus it comes to pass that my relations with
certain women, all exceptional personalities I think, are shining threads in my life.  

Her description of women’s affection as having a “mothering quality” may shed some
light on the “lesbian maternal” relationship between Ethel and Lisl. Though seemingly
contradictory, these roles of “mother” and “lover” were able to exist in the same sphere in
Smyth’s life. When the line between friendship and relationship was blurred, it is not
inconceivable that her passions may take on this additional dimension of “mothering.”

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22 Term used by Elizabeth Wood in a personal email correspondence with the author, December 2, 2020.
One noteworthy theme throughout her writings is the progression of love and death. Smyth presents many connections in her life, both literal and metaphorical, between love and death. When describing her many “passions” for women as a child, she recounts how she would “increase the anguish of love by fancying its object was prey to some terrible disease that would shortly snatch her from [Smyth].”

Even as a child, she had these grim intertwining fantasies about love and death. Later in her memoirs, in addition to dealing with the literal deaths of Lisl von Herzogenberg and H.B. Brewster, she discusses the beginnings and ends of relationships. She mentions the beginning of a correspondence with Brewster that symbolizes “the pivot of [her] life.” She has this incredible love connection with Lisl, which later ended and “shaped [her] whole existence.” The lack of closure in the relationship between Ethel and Lisl keeps both the love and death of the relationship “alive” in Smyth’s mind. Smyth claims that, in regard to Lisl, “there is still a debt to be paid—a debt which, across the faint line that divides the living from the dead, I can go on paying to the end.”

This reference to “the end” can perhaps connect to the last major work that she composed: *The Prison*.

**The Prison**

Smyth’s last major work, *The Prison*, is a choral symphony written for bass-baritone soloist, soprano soloist, SATB chorus, and orchestra. This work, recently recorded and released by the Experiential Chorus and Orchestra under James Blachly, is a little over an hour long. It consists of two main sections: Part I: Close on Freedom and Part II: The Deliverance. The text, adapted from *The Prison: A Dialogue* by H.B. Brewster, follows a dialogue between a Prisoner and his Soul as the Prisoner works to understand his own mortality and accept death. The piece is beautifully crafted, showcasing a range of compositional talent and experience.

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The progression of love and death permeates both Smyth’s language surrounding the text of The Prison and H.B. Brewster’s own feelings on the text. This language expresses the cyclical nature of life, love, and death. Smyth notes that Brewster’s “writings, above all The Prison, reveal his real feeling about death; that all it amounts to is a slight shifting of the kaleidoscope, a new chapter in a story without beginning or end, another adventure probably as enthralling as the one concluded by what we call death.”\(^{25}\) This same sentiment is expressed in the phrase “the bonds of self,” coined by W.R. Anderson in his 1931 review of Smyth’s The Prison as “the record of a struggle to escape from the bonds of self.”\(^{26}\) In the text, death is the thing that frees “the bonds of self,” so the only constants are love and death. What are Smyth’s “bonds of self” in this piece?

The Prison was written in a tumultuous period in Smyth’s life: one filled with both conclusion and uncertainty. She had been losing her hearing for some time, and this was her last major work before it made it difficult for her to engage in large-scale composition. Additionally, this was a text that she had considered setting for some time. Brewster and Smyth had worked together on many librettos in earlier years, and this presented a unique opportunity to set portions of Brewster’s book years after his death. Smyth wrote: “Now in later years I had sometimes been haunted by the idea of carrying The Prison into the musical workshop and trying to mate it somehow with music. But though paragraph after paragraph seemed to cry aloud for such a union, the problem of how to effect it seemed insoluble.”\(^{27}\) Eventually, this union became clear to her and she composed the piece from 1929-1930, over 20 years after Brewster’s death.

While Smyth was very passionate about this work, critic reviews were less than ideal. Robert Hull notes that the choice of text for this piece is “an essay considerably beyond her

\(^{25}\) Smyth, Female Pipings in Eden, 112.
\(^{27}\) Smyth, Female Pipings in Eden, 88-89.
natural range.”\textsuperscript{28} While not directly negative, this language suggests that the topic was too complex in comparison to her earlier works. It is perhaps not unnatural to see the connection between this critique and critiques of her other works as either being “too feminine” or “too masculine.” The subversion of expectations plays a critical role here. In addition, W.R. Anderson critiques the mixture of styles and setting of the text, saying “I cannot feel that her music is really inseeing, or that it suggests more than the poem does: and if it fails to suggest more, why set the poem?”\textsuperscript{29} Upon analysis, it becomes clear that the music suggests more than simply the original meanings of the poem. In regard to the mixture of styles, this is not necessarily a negative aspect of her music. Smyth creates this in a deliberate manner.

**Genre**

Smyth identifies *The Prison* as a choral symphony. This term typically denotes a work with orchestra and choir in a “symphonic form.” Beethoven’s iconic Ninth Symphony—his so-called choral symphony—is in four movements, typical of the Classical symphony. However, *The Prison* presents a striking contrast to the expectations one might have of a symphony. Rather than four movements, it consists of two “parts.” These parts are distinguished by contrasting textual themes. Part I, “Close on Freedom,” has the Prisoner questioning the reasoning for his death and mortality, while Part II, “The Deliverance,” has the Prisoner finally accept death and understand his mortality. The bridge between these parts is an instrumental “Choral Prelude in the Chapel” at the start of Part II, which contains excerpts from *Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott*. Though it contains this overarching two-part form based on the text, the piece is largely through-composed. The form and repetition of material are not as important to the piece as the

\textsuperscript{28} Robert Hull, “Dame Ethel Smyth” *Tempo*, no. 7 (1944): 12.
\textsuperscript{29} Anderson, 38.
textual implications that drive the music. This is perhaps the reasoning behind Anderson’s criticism of the lack of “unified structure.” In attempting to understand precedents for Smyth’s treatment of structure and form, scholars have considered possible relationships between The Prison and other choral symphonies composed around the same time. Schaarwächter notes the connection with Hubert Parry’s sinfonie sacre of the early twentieth century, which were moral and spiritual cantatas. These works were also often criticized for their perceived lack of unified structure. As with The Prison, these sinfonie sacre were largely structured around the text. Perhaps Smyth drew upon the fellow English composer’s style in her last major work. Schaarwächter additionally notes the possible dramatic and philosophical connections to Handelian oratorios. He discusses the similarities in dramatic style and topic choice. This emphasis on textual elements further explains the relative lack of structural focus. Indeed, further relationships can be made with other oratorios. The unison C opening to The Prison harkens to the opening of Haydn’s oratorio The Creation. In Haydn’s piece, this jarring note can be understood as the “big bang” that created the universe. What follows is known as “The Representation of Chaos.” The Prison opens with a similar unison note followed by a recitative by the Prisoner discussing being awoken in the middle of the night, as seen in Figure 1. This representation of new beginnings thematically connects the pieces to one another. Perhaps, in its connection to the oratorio and Haydn’s “Representation of Chaos,” Smyth justifies the unconventional structure of The Prison.

30 Anderson, 38.
32 Schaarwächter, 255.
Indeed, Smyth did not intend at all to compose *The Prison* in Classical symphonic form. In the program notes of the first performance, Smyth writes: “In Greek and Roman times the word *Symphony* merely meant a ‘concord of sweet sounds.’ Even to-day some composers still think this a desirable end, so perhaps one may be pardoned for using the word in its original sense — if only as indicating an aspiration.”\(^{34}\) As it applies to *The Prison*, Smyth clearly intends for the term choral symphony to be understood in light of the original meaning of the word *Symphony* and not as a marker of the Classical form. Nonetheless, the language “perhaps one may be pardoned for using the word in its original sense” still acknowledges the connection to


the form. If she knew that people would make this connection and even have some confusion, why does she insist on coining it a symphony?

While this coinage may be done in order to further connect the piece to its historical predecessors, it seems that Smyth also purposefully does this in order to subvert expectation. Smyth herself knows what is meant by her usage of symphony, but this clearly was not understood by the general public and critics, as she predicted in the program notes. Having used choral symphony to describe her work, Smyth subverts the listener’s expectations as the work unfolds. The slow realization of the difference of form for the listener parallels the Prisoner’s gradual change of thought regarding mortality. Though this realization for the listener seems not to have been perceived or understood by critics like Anderson, Smyth may nonetheless have intended for the audience reaction to mimic this philosophical revelation.

Additionally, Smyth’s use of the term symphony may have had gendered connotations. The symphony was considered a more masculine form at the time.35 In suggesting the use of a masculine form, Smyth was subverting the expectations for female composers. However, this suggestion paired with her rejection of the formal structure further rejects societal gender roles. Those that adhered strongly to the notion of the “masculine symphony” may have taken this as a mockery of the form. This reference and deliberate deviance from the traditional symphony creates a more gender fluid reading of her music. In this way, Smyth’s usage of the term choral symphony reflects both her feminist and queer rejections of hegemonic gender roles.

**Prisoner and Soul Dialogue**

In her work, Smyth draws upon multiple intertextual references in order to position the work within preexisting frameworks. One intertextual idea that permeates *The Prison* is the dialogue between the Prisoner and his Soul. This type of dialogue is not unique to Smyth nor

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Brewster, as it has been used by philosophers throughout history. One of the earliest musical examples of this is seen in Emilio de’ Cavalieri’s *Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo* (*Representation of the Soul and the Body*), set to a libretto by Agnostino Manni. This piece from 1600 may be the first to use ideas similar to opera or oratorio. Perhaps in drawing upon a similar philosophical libretto in *The Prison*, Smyth connects her work to similar works such as this throughout music history, beginning with the first known example of opera or oratorio. In doing so, Smyth is able to place herself and her work parallel to the historical musical canon. In considering the lack of female representation in the canon, especially during her life, this placement echoes her feminist ideals regarding women composers.

Brewster’s Prisoner in Smyth’s hands may also bear associations for Smyth to her favorite opera, Beethoven’s *Fidelio*—another more recent canonical work.36 In the opera, a man is a political prisoner and is eventually freed by his wife, who masquerades as a man to save him. While not a dialogue between the Prisoner and his Soul, the opera contains an interesting subversion of gender roles. By having the woman save the man in *Fidelio*, the woman is provided more agency. However, this agency is granted through masquerading as a man, creating a more ambiguous, gender-fluid reading of her agency. Perhaps Smyth could see herself reflected in this agentive, “gender-fluid” woman.

Similarly, Smyth’s use of a soprano Soul is notable, as one may initially expect for the gender of the Prisoner and Soul to match. The Soul in *The Prison* is voiced by a soprano soloist acting as the voice of reason for the bass-baritone Prisoner. Though the Soul has this “female agency,” she is still ultimately connected to the male Prisoner. This duality perhaps reflects the double standard that Smyth experienced in the music field. No matter what she produced, she

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was constantly compared to her male counterparts. Alternatively, this voicing difference may represent lesbian desire. The gender dichotomy may depict the juxtaposition between her identity as a woman and her adoption of the stereotypical “male role” in heterosexual gender and sexuality roles.

Figure 2. Soul and Prisoner call-and-response in The Prison.\textsuperscript{37}

Nevertheless, Smyth’s portrayal of female agency through this register choice is still noteworthy. This is especially evident in the section where the voices of the Prisoner and Soul overlap. Figure 2 shows a section near the end of the piece where the Prisoner and Soul perform a call-and-response followed by a declarative unison line. In the call-and-response, the Prisoner begins with “I am the home,” ending on a B natural. This is then followed by the Soul declaring “Let there be banners, banners and music,” overlapping with a unison B natural. This portion is repeated with a movement up to C natural in both soloists. This unison overlap and call-and-response is perhaps reflective of the parallel placement of Smyth’s works within the musical canon. The female Soul is present alongside the male Prisoner, thus adding to the effectiveness of the line. This is further supported by the unison declaration of “This is no leavetaking.” Though The Prison is Smyth’s last major work, this unison statement may be

\textsuperscript{37} Smyth, The Prison, 198-201.
interpreted as her claiming her place, and perhaps the place of future female composers, alongside men in the canon. The Soul and Prisoner lines are equal, each contributing to the musical phrase.

**Bach Chorale Melody**

As previously mentioned, the bridge between Parts I and II contains an instrumental prelude called “Choral Prelude in the Chapel.” Incorporated in this prelude is a Bach chorale melody titled *Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott*. Smyth had created multiple arrangements of this chorale melody prior to composing *The Prison*; most notable is her arrangement for organ (No. 3 in her *Short Chorale Preludes*). In fact, Smyth inserted a nearly direct transcription of this organ work from 1913 in the “Choral Prelude in the Chapel.” In this orchestral transcription, the strings maintain the majority of the original musical fabric of the organ arrangement throughout. The rest of the orchestra gradually enters, leading to a full orchestral ending. The violin I carries the interspersed chorale melody, often doubled or supported by the trumpet.

As an orchestral prelude, the chorus and soloists are not used, so there is no chorale text along with the melody in *The Prison*. However, the inclusion of this specific chorale arrangement in the “Choral Prelude in the Chapel” is purposeful. The use of the melody still suggests an underlying meaning and connection to the text. The first two verses of text for *Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott* are given below. Though Bach only set the second verse of text in his chorale setting, both are included in order to provide textual context.

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Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott,
Du betrübte Seele!
Warum liegst du, Gott zum Spott,
In der Schwermutshöhle?
Merkst du nicht des Satans List?
Er will durch sein Kämpfen
Deinen Trost, den Jesus Christ
Dir erworben, dämpfen.
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Raise yourself up to your God, 
you troubled soul!
Why do you lie, in mockery of God, 
in the slough of melancholy?
Are you not aware of Satan’s cunning?
through his opposition he wants
to lessen your consolation,
which Jesus Christ gained for you

Schüttle deinen Kopf und sprich:
"Fleuch, du alte Schlange!
Was erneurst du deinen Stich,
Machst mir angst und bange?
Ist dir doch der Kopf zerknickt,
Und ich bin durchs Leiden
Meines Heilands dir entzückt
In den Saal der Freuden."

Shake your head and say:
flee, you old serpent!
Why do you renew your sting
and make me anxious and fearful?
Now your head is crushed,
and through the suffering
of my Saviour I am taken from you
into the hall of joys.\(^{38}\)

The text of this chorale details the act of rejecting Satan and becoming saved in the image
of the Christian God. This perhaps provides a religious interpretation of the struggles afflicting
the Prisoner in *The Prison*. Marleen Hoffmann argues that the insertion of this specific chorale
melody “reveals a parallel between the prisoner and the Christian sinner and the inner struggles
both must wage.”\(^{39}\) Indeed, this parallel is most noteworthy in the text regarding the
relinquishing of suffering. The last half of the second verse above includes the phrase “*Ist dir
doch der Kopf zerknickt, / Und ich bin durchs Leiden / Meines Heilands dir entzückt / In den

\(^{38}\) Paul Gerhardt, “Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott: Text & Translation of Chorale,” Bach Cantatas
\(^{39}\) Marleen Hoffmann, Preface to *The Prison: Study Score 1654*, Composed by Ethel Smyth (München:
Musikproduktion Höflisch, 2015).
“Saal der Freuden” (Now your head is crushed, / and through the suffering / of my Saviour I am taken from you / into the hall of joys). Immediately after the “Choral Prelude in the Chapel,” the Soul begins the text of Part II with the phrase “The struggle is over; the time has come, the choice is made.” Clearly the text is implied in the orchestral prelude, as the religious parallel creates a thematic segue between Parts I and II. The Prisoner’s journey mirrors the sinner’s journey in the search for spiritual meaning.

Additionally, this textual idea of suffering and saving harkens to the Christian notion of the passion of Christ. This passion details the end of Jesus’ life and death, culminating in his resurrection and taking away of the sins of the world. A further parallel can liken the Prisoner and Soul’s journey of understanding with the journey of the Christ figure. Both grapple in understanding their role and purpose. Perhaps it is also salient to see the dichotomy here between the passion of Christ and Smyth’s self-described “passions” for women. Does Smyth paint herself as a Christ figure in her passions? This may explain her tendency to “increase the anguish of love by fancying its object was prey to some terrible disease that would shortly snatch her from [Smyth].” In doing so, she may liken herself to Christ and the Soul “saving” the Prisoner.

Figure 3. Melody of Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott insertion in The Prison.

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41 Smyth, Impressions That Remained, 19.
The melody of the embellished chorale theme is given in Figure 3. As stated, Smyth intersperses these melodic phrases into the surrounding musical fabric. In fact, the melody is often heard as an occasional thought, with the majority of the movement being in the surrounding parts. These surrounding parts often contain significant traces of the melodic line. Indeed, the interval of a fourth in the first measure of the melody in Figure 3 is tossed around the surrounding parts, including interjections by wind instruments during the largely string-based portions. The back and forth motion of this melodic line is fugal in its nature. Elizabeth Wood likens Smyth’s narrative structure to that of a fugue, with a metaphor of fugal counterpoint masking a “musically coded lesbian message.”43 If this lesbian message is present in the fugal elements of her written text, it is safe to assume that this message is present in her compositions as well. The nature of fugues rests in an idea of deception, twisting the melodic line in repetition and new keys. This can often render the original melody unrecognizable. Perhaps Smyth’s deception with the chorale melody mirrors her masking of lesbian desire. Her use of this fugal process in the chorale melody reflects Wood’s metaphor of her musically coded lesbian messaging.

The intertextuality and intermusicality of Smyth’s use of the chorale melody Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott provides a direct connection between The Prison and the Baroque. As with the previous instances of intertextual references, this insertion serves to further place the work within the preexisting notions of the musical canon. Through the reference to Bach’s arrangement of the melody, yet in her own arrangement, Smyth is able to draw on Baroque ideals while remaining true to her own style. Additionally, the use of her arrangement from 1913 links

the piece to her music created directly after her Suffragette work. Her feminist principles provide a strong basis for the compositional insertion.

Further intertextuality with principles of Christianity connects to both Smyth’s feminist identity and lesbian desire. Through the textual parallels between *Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott* and *The Prison*, Smyth draws a connection between the Prisoner and the notion of being saved through the passion of Christ. The dichotomy between this passion and her passion for women provides a queer reading of this melodic and implied textual insertion. Through this, Smyth’s use of the chorale melody allows her to position the work within her identity and desire as a queer woman and paint her journey as a sacrifice for future female composers.

**Bugle Call**

The end of Part II contains fragments of the British military bugle call known as “the Last Post.” This call, meant to honor those who died in battle, is based in B-Flat Major and built on triadic movement and motives. Figure 4 shows the two instances of this bugle call in Part II. For each of these insertions, the solo trumpet is marked as “outside,” meaning that the trumpet is offstage and projecting as a “disembodied voice.” Each insertion comprises a different section of “the Last Post,” possessing different characters for the composition. Additionally, the first insertion is followed by orchestral motives of a fifth interval, referencing the other bugle call “the Rouse” that often follows “the Last Post.”

The first, seen in Figure 4(a), is slower and more somber. This first insertion is preceded and followed by the Soul and Prisoner repeating the words “the death.” Perhaps, in this sense, the bugle call here is meant to represent the “call of death,” disembodied to depict the abstract concept for the Prisoner. The second insertion in Figure 4(b) is longer and contains a faster succession of notes when compared to 4(a), giving it a more urgent feel. This sense of urgency is
fitting in its placement at the end of the piece. It seems to harken to the expression “time moves faster the older you get.” As Smyth’s last large work—and with it her compositional career—nears the end, the urgency in the “call of death” becomes synonymous with endings.

(a) 

(b) 

Figure 4. (a) First iteration of the bugle call in The Prison; (b) Second iteration of the bugle call in The Prison.

While many composers have made use of “the Last Post” in their compositions, Smyth’s use is notable in its parallels to Beethoven’s usage of horn and bugle calls. In his opera Fidelio, Beethoven announced the prisoner’s freedom with a bugle call to symbolize his liberation. In considering this in conjunction with the earlier discussion of Fidelio in terms of the subversion of gender roles, this bugle call takes on a new meaning of fluidity and freedom of gender expression. This connection once again positions the work and call in terms of Smyth’s lesbian desire and gender identity.

Additionally, Beethoven uses bugle call-like melodies in some of his orchestral works. The opening theme of Symphony No. 3 “Eroica” in E-Flat Major, movement 1 features cello triadic movements. This triadic theme, used throughout the piece imitatively, can be likened to a

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46 Wood, Liner notes, 13.
horn call, like “the Last Post,” harkening to the “hero” (“Eroica”) of the symphony. If
Beethoven’s bugle call motive is used to denote the hero, perhaps Smyth’s usage can be viewed
similarly. When understanding the composition as her last major work and the culmination of a
career in a male-dominated field, the theme of “endings” parallels the success of the hero. In this
interpretation, the hero is Smyth in her trailblazing for future women in the field. Though this
reading contains more validity with hindsight than a purposeful meaning at the time of
composition, it remains an important example, especially in considering the evolution of intent
and interpretation of the piece.

Furthermore, the association of “the Last Post” with death may also relate to the death of
those with whom Smyth was once close. The most direct connection to this line of thinking is
H.B. Brewster, to whom this insertion may be inserted as a memorial. Since Brewster wrote the
text and inspired the initial idea behind The Prison, this dedication is logical. However, this still
does not rule out the possibility of multiple dedications. The insertion of “the Last Post” could be
in memoriam of multiple important figures in her life, including both Brewster and Lisl von
Herzogenberg. The possible connection to Lisl (in addition to other women with whom Smyth
had a relationship) further positions the work within Smyth’s experiences of lesbian desire. Here,
the motif of love and death returns in a striking memorial of her past loves.

The reference to past loves continues in the possibility of the bugle call as a metaphor for
sexual seduction. Wood suggests that Smyth’s use of fugue and horn calls references the
historical association with “the chase” and seduction in order to “reconstruct her erotic
relationships with women and to shape lesbian experience.”

47 Wood, Liner notes, 13.
provides important context for the consideration of lesbian desire. Perhaps this usage may recall the back-and-forth of her relationship with Lisl, which quickly and urgently came to an end. Or, more generally, the sexual nature of her desire. Regardless, the multiple interpretations of the bugle call in terms of the “feminist hero” and lesbian desire still serve to position the reference within her gender and sexuality experiences.

**Bird Calls**

Another prominent call throughout the work is that of a bird call, inserted directly near the end of Part I. This bird call is noteworthy in its original transcription, since, as is noted in the score, the call was first notated by Heinrich von Herzogenberg, Smyth’s first teacher and Lisl’s husband. Herzogenberg first notated this mountain thrush call and used it in his *Prelude and Fugue in F-Sharp Major*, Op. 49, no. 1. Smyth inserts the full bird call theme at the end of Part I, with a solo in the oboe. The first utterance of the theme is shown in Figure 5(a). As seen here, the theme is based on a repeated dotted rhythmic motive of a fourth interval followed by 16th note successions of the same interval, eventually migrating to the flat-7 of key. This theme then gets used and reused in an almost contrapuntal manner.

(a)

(b)

![Figure 5. (a) Full bird call theme in The Prison; (b) 16th note bird call motive in The Prison.](image)

This first iteration of the bird call theme is part of a larger contrapuntal usage. This orchestral passage occurs at the end of Part I, right before the Prisoner begins to understand.

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After the initial statement of the theme, it begins to be used motivically throughout the orchestra. The dotted rhythmic motive of a fourth, especially, is tossed around imitatively and developed with the changes in key. The full theme is stated again multiple times, transposed each time with the development of the keys. This orchestral interlude, as mentioned, occurs right before the last stanza of Part I, when the Prisoner begins to understand the nature of his mortality. In this way, the insertion of the bird call can represent the natural state of understanding, acceptance, and new beginnings.

Though the bird call is one explicitly used in its entirety at the end of Part I, Figure 5(b) shows the use of the 16th note fourth interval motive used and developed in a later section of the work. This motive usage corresponds with the Prisoner singing the lines “I hear the flight of the divine vultures / That bear away my substance shred by shred. / The wind of their wings is as ice on my forehead.” Though the full bird call is not used here, the parallel of “vultures” in connection to the thrush call is noteworthy. While the thrush seems to thematically represent new life, the imagery of the vultures “that bear away my substance shred by shred” contains a much darker undertone. The juxtaposition of these ideas together creates a striking contrast that seems to give more light to the dark imagery. In fact, this dark imagery is meant in a way that seems to suggest awestruck wonder and acceptance. Thus, this motivic device further translates that message and furthers the representation of new beginnings, but this time with death as the beginning.

While this bird call was not originally notated or used by Lisl von Herzogenberg, Smyth’s prominent usage of it is noteworthy in terms of her relationship with Lisl. Wood notes how Smyth’s use of repetition of narratives about Lisl represents desire and lesbian identity. “Repetition, more an artifice of discourse than a property of the story it represents, enabled
Smyth to articulate feelings that had been disguised and fugitive but to keep invisible both her lesbian relationship with Lisl and its subsequent cover-up by others.” The repetition of both the bird call and its subsequent motives may depict this relationship with Lisl. In fact, Lisl’s illustrations of birds were included in a manuscript of Prelude and Fugue in F-Sharp Major, Op. 49, no. 1. Perhaps the bird or bird call is Lisl’s ever present nature in Smyth’s mind. As Smyth has many memories of pain associated with her relationship with Lisl, the juxtaposition of dark and light imagery in the “divine vultures” section may depict this bittersweet nature.

On the other hand, Heinrich von Herzogenberg, Lisl’s husband, did begin Smyth’s musical career. Though the influence of Lisl is certainly more prevalent for Smyth in terms of her sexuality and desire, Heinrich’s influence more directly impacted the direction of Smyth’s compositional works. If this piece is truly viewed as a culmination of her life’s works and the accomplishments that she made, this insertion of the bird call could be done as an homage to Heinrich, perhaps in addition to Lisl. In line with Wood’s discussion of repetition disguising Smyth’s feelings, the outward effect of this insertion may be an homage to Heinrich, while the inward, more personal, meaning for Smyth may relate to her feelings for Lisl.

Even so, this bird call is likely not something that the audience at the time would be expected to recognize. Prelude and Fugue in F-Sharp Major was written during the teaching period of Heinrich’s life, and was not discovered until it was found in Smyth’s personal papers. This suggests that Smyth and the Herzogenbergs may have been the only ones to know the bird call, in addition to any friends or colleagues who may have heard Heinrich’s original composition. With this information, it would appear that the attribution of the bird call to

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53 Klek, 22.
Herzogenberg was only known to Smyth and anyone reading the score. This suggests a definite personal dimension to the bird call. This hidden meaning behind the insertion parallels the notion of “the closet” in Smyth’s life and works.

With this intermusical insertion, there are two juxtaposing lines of communication of meaning: the outward and the inward. Outwardly, the bird call is representative of new beginnings and understanding. It may also represent an homage to Heinrich von Herzogenberg’s influence on Smyth's career. However, inwardly the Herzogenberg bird call reveals a repetitive reference to Smyth’s relationship with Lisl. The bittersweet memories and the hidden nature of their love reveals itself in the thematic connection between memories of desire and love and death motifs. Like a cycle of love and death, the repetition of the bird call may continually represent Smyth’s love, desire, and guilt associated with the end of her relationship with Lisl.

**Ruth and Naomi**

Though the text was written by H.B. Brewster, Smyth’s composition of *The Prison* translates and recontextualizes the words to create new life and meaning. One instance of this is seen in Part II, with the phrase “Wheresoe’er you are there shall I be, / I survive in you!”54 This declaration is made by the Prisoner and repeated by the chorus of voices. This text harkens to the Biblical passage from the book of Ruth, in which Ruth says to Naomi “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.”55 This passage is often revered for Ruth’s display of dedication to her mother-in-law. However, this also is representative of important themes to gender and sexuality studies: solidarity between women and same-sex intimacy.

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55 Ruth 1:16-17 (NIV).
The story of Ruth and Naomi represents a powerful display of strength and fortitude between two women. The promise to continue to be present in one another’s lives is a theme that spans various women’s movements and women’s institutions. In fact, there are two Tiffany windows depicting Ruth and Naomi in the chapel at Vassar College, which was previously a women’s college in the United States. Solidarity among women is certainly a mantra practiced by Smyth in her work with the Suffragettes. Smyth even attended prison with her fellow Suffragettes in an extreme display of “wheresoe’er you are there shall I be.” The relation of this passage from Ruth to *The Prison* fits nicely with the narrative of feminism in Smyth’s experiences in and out of music. Within the field of composition, this statement may be read as encouragement to future female composers.

The closeness of women in this context also warrants a queer reading. In fact, scholars have long noted the homoeroticism inherent in the story of Ruth and Naomi. Many point to the book as “a powerful scriptural example of same-sex intimacy.”\(^5^6\) Though not necessarily a display of sexual desire, the degree of intimacy can be likened to the female “friendships” present during Smyth’s lifetime, especially the “lesbian maternal” relationship between Smyth and Lisl. In the use of this Biblical reference, Smyth is able to draw upon these preconceived notions of same-sex intimacy in a coded manner. Though more overtly a message of female empowerment and solidarity, the queer undertones present a likely reference for Smyth’s experiences, as well.

As mentioned, the text of *The Prison* that relates to the book of Ruth is heard in Part II. At this point in the choral symphony, the Prisoner has accepted and fully understood his fate and mortality in a positive light. Directly before this passage, the piece centers around E Major.

However, the first instance of this text seems to circle throughout different keys, developing the tonal center. In this way, the section is a jarring harmonic contrast to the surrounding material and subverts the expectations of the listener. As this text is not written directly by Smyth, but translated and recontextualized, Smyth is able to purposefully highlight this text. The illumination of the text supports the theory of a deeper meaning behind the text, possibly alluding to the parallels with Ruth and Naomi.

Overall, the use of this Biblical text reference points to an overarching theme of selflessness on the part of Smyth. In presenting this message of solidarity, she displays a message of empowerment for future composers, painting herself as a “martyr” for women in the field of composition. Though this martyrdom may be more of a modern interpretation than one from the time, the usage also reflects her work in the Suffrage Movement and the unity inherent in that experience. In a similar vein, the queer coded messaging in the Biblical reference, in conjunction with Smyth’s own experiences with same-sex intimacy, portrays a selfless message of solidarity for other queer individuals after Smyth. In a cyclical manner, the insertion of the Ruth Biblical text connects once again to the selflessness in the passion of Christ. With this text, Smyth is able to represent her lesbian desire, struggles as a female composer, and feminist message.

**Discussion**

One of the main ways through which Smyth positions her work within her gender and sexuality experiences is in the idea of the “bonds of self.” This term was coined by W.R. Anderson in his 1931 review of *The Prison* as “the record of a struggle to escape from the bonds of self.”\(^{57}\) This idea of “bonds of self” can be interpreted as meaning the personal things (mental, emotional, etc.) holding one back from living their full potential or truest form of self. These personal “bonds” may also refer to the socially constructed ideologies that permeate

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\(^{57}\) Anderson, 37.
understandings of self and place. In viewing this piece as a “struggle to escape from the bonds of self,” Anderson thematically categorizes the piece as one of self discovery or self empowerment.

An alternate reading of the notion “breaking the bonds of self” relates to the state of selflessness. By breaking away from the bonds that hold one strictly to oneself, a person is opened to a greater understanding of others and the world around them. Smyth’s previously discussed “martyrdom” for women in the music industry portrays a break from the notion of only studying Smyth in terms of her own time. Instead, we are able to view Smyth’s impact on future generations or, at least, the impact that she intended to make. Her work was largely for her own benefit. However, her extensive social justice work and activism suggests her goals of influencing composition with her actions and music.

Anderson’s critique likely refers directly to the struggle endured by the Prisoner, rather than that of Smyth. In Part II, the Prisoner sings the lines “Behold, I burst the bonds that pent you up / Within me; I disband myself!” In singing this, the Prisoner acknowledges his understanding of morality and releases the voices and Soul that aid in the explanation. In disbanding himself, the Prisoner separates his physical body from his Soul, thus presenting a message of eternal life after death. However, as we have seen, Smyth’s story is largely reflected in that of the Prisoner and the Soul. The breaking of the bonds of self permeates both her personal values and Brewster’s text.

Throughout The Prison, Smyth utilizes this notion of the “bonds of self” to further depict her gender and sexuality experiences. Through the use of the chorale melody, the imagery of a “savior” presents itself in the work. The savior notion, as we have discussed, allows Smyth to be read as a martyr in claiming her identity as a female composer. This idea is continued in the message of solidarity inherent in the Ruth and Naomi passage. In acknowledging the group

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58 Smyth, The Prison, 141-142.
efforts for activism and feminist messages, the bonds of self are broken for the identity group as a whole. A different sort of break of these bonds is inherent in the gender fluid readings of genre, dialogue, and the use of the bugle call. Through breaking the normative gender roles in expectation of form and positions of power, this fluid reading depicts a sense of liberation for the music and for Smyth, allowing gender to be referenced in a way that ignores its ideological weight and uses it as an artistic medium.

Additionally, this same bonds of self theme suggests connections to lesbian desire in the work. The passion of Christ harkens to the passions of Smyth’s childhood, as does the queer reading of Ruth and Naomi. As gender and sexuality often go hand in hand, especially for Smyth who faced discrimination on both fronts, the notion of martyrdom can be applied to both her identity as a female composer and her desire for women. The personal aspect of breaking the bonds of self is evident in her use of the bird call. The repetition of the call and its motives suggests a persistent desire for Lisl von Herzogenberg that often remains hidden below the surface. The hidden nature of this desire likens to the idea of “the closet.” In the uncovering of this desire, either purposefully by Smyth or through this modern reading of her work, the bonds of the closet are broken.

The idea of breaking the bonds of self can be read as a subversion of expectations. Especially when these bonds are brought on by social ideologies and stigmas, the break away from them goes against expected behaviors and concepts. Smyth has consistently subverted the expectations of those around her, from the choice to study composition to her extensive work with the Suffragettes. The very act of queerness and queer desire is also inherently a subversion of expectations. Though female friendships were common among married women, the idea of
lesbianism was seen as subversive and against the proper sphere for women. Thus, Smyth’s very nature and existence went against social norms.

This theme of the subversion of expectations is utilized throughout *The Prison* in order to project these ideas. The largest subversion of expectations is found in the gender fluid readings of genre, dialogue, and the bugle call. As this is also a break from the binary bonds of gender ideologies, this notion subverts the expected binary delineation of the time. The aesthetics of composition were categorized as either feminine or masculine. However, Smyth’s utilization of features from both categories in this piece goes against the expected distinction. By portraying a strong soprano-voiced Soul to guide the bass-voiced Prisoner, the archaic gender role expectations are reversed. Much like the reversal of power in Smyth’s Suffrage work and “role reversal” in pursuing lesbian desire, this reversal allows Smyth to reflect her own experiences in the music.

Finally, Smyth uses intertextuality throughout *The Prison* to reflect these experiences, as well. She places herself and her work within the larger canon of Western music in her usage of genre, dialogue, the Bach chorale, and the bugle call. Since women were historically discounted from a place in the Western musical canon, Smyth was lacking in representation. She thus carved her own spot into the canon, harkening to genres, ideas, and techniques that spanned music history. The contrapuntal nature of her work paired with the direct Bach insertion places her work with Bach, while her use of Prisoner and Soul dialogues draws even further back to the beginning of opera. The subversive nature of her themes and harmonies simultaneously allow for a Romantic and modernist reading. Though, as a female composer, she had been historically underrepresented, she fills in the gaps with her own work and identity.
The aforementioned contrapuntal and fugal themes in *The Prison* further relate to Wood’s notion of a “musically coded lesbian message.” These intertextual and intermusical ideas from history can be reworked in this way in order to present her experiences. Similarly, the use of the bird call melody from Herzogenberg’s work is able to present this same coded meaning of lesbian desire. This bird call paired with the relationship to the Ruth and Naomi text suggests the hidden reference to the “lesbian maternal” relationship with Lisl. The underlying concept of same-sex desire and intimacy throughout *The Prison* allows Smyth to further represent her experiences in her work without endangering her reputation.

**Conclusion**

Further research can be done on the relationship between *The Prison* and notions of Greek philosophy. A few years prior to the release of *The Prison*, Smyth went on a trip to Greece, recounted in her memoir *A Three-Legged Tour in Greece*. Brewster’s writing was also primarily a philosophical work, drawing on classical Greek philosophy. Smyth perhaps references this in the use of the Seikilos Epitaph and Ajax Fragment—representing two ancient Greek modes—in Part II of the work. These fragments are some of the earliest known notated pieces of music. The usage of these fragments may further draw on the relationship to the Western musical canon by placing her work all the way back to Antiquity. While this is outside the scope of the current paper, these connections suggest that more research can be done on the application of Greek philosophy and the Greek modes to gender and lesbian desire representations in *The Prison*.

Throughout *The Prison*, Smyth was able to position the work within her gender and sexuality experiences through the references to intertextuality, the subversion of expectations, and the idea of the “bonds of self.” Her experiences of lesbian desire and gender representation

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in the composition field are represented in the piece through elements of both discrimination and activism. Though this piece was Smyth’s last major work, her purposeful and perceived references to identity and desire allow for her experiences to continue to impact future generations of women and LGBTQ+ individuals in music.


