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<b>Title</b>	<i>Women composers at Oxford: Cinderella (1858-1944) and other role models</i>
<b>Description</b>	In the history of the University, women and music have shared a Cinderella-like status before the 20th Century. In this talk, Dr Wollenberg looks at how women composers have continued to change the face of Oxford music in new ways
<b>Presenter(s)</b>	Susan Wollenberg
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**Susan Wollenberg** Good morning and welcome to this first session of the day.

I'm Susan Wollenberg and my subject for this talk is Women Composers at Oxford, Cinderella, Ethel Smyth, 1858 to 1944, and other Role Models.

My talk falls into three sections. First an introductory discussion of women composers. Then the central section will be on Ethel Smyth and Oxford. And finally, I'll turn to a personal account of women composers at Oxford.

By the way, the music that was playing at the beginning was by Madeleine Dring, the 20th-century British composer. And it was being played on that CD by Rosemary Hancock-Child who, a former pupil of mine, who's made a special enterprise of finding and recording and editing and writing about the music of, particularly British composers of the 20th century; and including women composers.

She was hoping to have been able to come but I doubt if we'll see her today because her husband had a slight accident yesterday in some sort of sporting thing and she may not have made it from deepest Devon. But I'd like to acknowledge her work and say how proud I am of her as I am of many of pupils. All my pupils.

And now I'll begin.

Women composers then. Almost a year ago now in November 2008, I participated in a major international conference marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of the British composer, Dame Ethel Smyth.

Apart from the intrinsic interest of the subject, Smyth was a wonderful composer and is a fascinating person to study, I was also very much struck by the special-ness of this event in terms of where women composers are now.

I think that 20 years ago, that just wouldn't have happened. There would not have been a conference on a woman composer.

And it was an extensive celebration of Smyth's life and work that we had last November in Detmold and in Oxford. There was a complementary event here twinned with the German conference. Very appropriately because Smyth had a distinctly Anglo-German presence.

She received her musical training in Leipzig. She moved in the circle of Brahms, among others. And, at the same time, was well known in British social and cultural circles in her lifetime. And, indeed, hasn't really been forgotten since.

But I would imagine this may have been the first ever conference devoted solely to Smyth and her work.

Altogether, we're living in an exciting age for the study of women composers and their music. There are all sorts of reasons that could be advanced as to why these composers 20 years ago, and before that, were among the ranks of the marginalised.

As the writer Carol Shields put it via her female narrator in the Novel Unless, and this is in the letter that the narrator is writing to the author of the book about problem solving in which all the examples of successful problem solving are by men:

"I don't think you intend to be discouraging in your book. I think you have merely overlooked those who are routinely overlooked. That is to say, half the world's population."

So that was Carol Shields in the novel, Unless, which was published in 2001.

One reason within my own professional sphere why this has happened is perhaps that for a long time musicology was frankly male-dominated. Indeed, the overwhelming majority not only of musicologists but of composers, conductors, music critics, were male. Concert programming, the writing of music histories, the exercising of cultural control, all these were done by men. And that's changed and it's changing still.

We're emerging from a period of some 25 years, from the 1980s to the present, during which women composers have been brought more and more into the foreground.

If I may be permitted a brief autobiographical note here. I personally was the first woman to be appointed to a university post in music at Oxford. So – and this was in the 1970s. I was the first ever woman member of the Oxford music faculty which was situated then at 32 Holywell, next to the music room.

I guess, in a way, swept along by circumstances –slightly beyond my control actually but that's another story – I was being a pioneer. It certainly felt like it.

However, let's return now to a much more illustrious pioneer – Dame Ethel Smyth.

We're going to hear from her during this talk in more ways than one. Let's hear her now.

**Female** Live interview from 1938 recalling her first meeting with the great composer as engineered by the English conductor George Henschel.

**Ethel Smyth** Suddenly, what do I see? Henschel seizing Brahms by the arm and walking him straight in my direction.

"So this," said Brahms, "is the young lady who composes songs and sonatas without having studied counterpoint."

**Susan Wollenberg** Is it loud enough?

**Ethel Smyth** In my innocence, I took this remark to be a compliment. But it was really deepest irony. For as I afterwards learned, he had remarked to a woman I knew that these so-called Smyth manuscripts were obviously the work of Henschel himself.

**Susan Wollenberg** As the narrator of that programme went on to say, it's not really very girly music, is it? And that was one of Smyth's early string chamber pieces from the time when she was studying in Leipzig and met Brahms. And in case it was a bit quiet at the beginning, she said that Brahms was being steered in her direction and then the rest followed.

So, I'll find my place and move on now to Smyth and Oxford.

On Wednesday the 23rd of June 1926, a remarkable event took place at the University of Oxford. Readers skimming the local newspaper, the Oxford Times, on the Friday following, would have found this comment under the heading of "The Commemoration: University honours distinguished visitors".

"Some of the glories of the old time Encaenia were revived on Wednesday when the Chancellor, Viscount Cave, conferred degrees on some of the country's most distinguished men."

Viscount Cave, that was George Cave, the lawyer and politician who was an honorary fellow graduate and then honorary fellow of St John's. That's for any St John's people around.

Reading further, tucked away among the long list of 'men' receiving honorary degrees in law and other subjects in the Sheldonian Theatre on that occasion, they would have discovered and exception to the norm. And this noted as follows:

"Honorary degree of D.Mus, Dame Ethel Mary Smyth, DBE".

The newspaper report quoted the public orator's encomium in presenting Ethel Smyth at the Encaenia. So I'll quote it now:

"A leader of the militant suffragettes who wrote their song comes to receive our welcome today draped as a very different leader. We all admire her grand and impressive mass. The power and variety of her musical works and operas, *The Wreckers*, *The Boatswain's Mate*. In her music and librettos, there is humour. Her force of character has advanced her to a prominent place among musicians."

This was the lady who went round knocking at the doors of the opera houses in Germany saying, "You must produce my operas." That was me, not the Oxford Times.

And the Oxford Times went on to remind us that, as the public orator reminded his listeners:

"She's also given us a vivid record of her life in *Impressions That Remained* and *Streaks of Life*. I leave it to you," he said, "to honour our Pallas." PALLAS.

Well, Smyth herself wrote a couple of days later in a letter to her great niece, Elizabeth Mary Williamson, which has only just recently surfaced:

"We had a great reception at the Encaenia which really was lovely sight. The sun blazing through the south windows of the Sheldonian."

And Smyth commented further:

"The Mus.Docs come last and I was the only one at the tail of precision. So doubt if I shall be much to the fore in the photographs. They probably took one for the housekeeper."

She did, however, mention that she saw herself in the Times sitting next to Sir Austen Chamberlain.

Let's stay with that day then, 23rd of June 1926, for a few more chunks of quoted material from the sources that I've been studying.

Afterwards, as the report in the Oxford Times went on, a large company luncheoned at All Souls College at the conclusion of the ceremony. Ethel Smyth is listed among the lunch guests. Besides the honorands, these included a large throng of visiting dignitaries, members of the aristocracy, eminent politicians and leading university figures. Among them, some principals of the women's colleges.

The celebrations continued through the day. I'll quote again from the newspaper report:

"All those who had honorary degrees conferred upon them at the Encaenia were the guests of the president and fellows of St John's College at a garden party given in the College groves during the afternoon.

"The picturesque groves made an admirable setting. And favoured with ideal weather, the party proved a successful function with about 900 attending.

"The band of the Irish Guards played selections throughout the afternoon".

Besides enjoying the lunch party, Smyth visited the women's colleges. At Somerville, where she was very happy, she was a guest of the principal, Miss Penrose.

"The last person to be my hostess, you'd think," she comments in her letter to her great niece. "Though I believe she's an excellent principal and won my heart, in spite of very conventional manners, by her adoration of Greece and her lovely paintings."

And at LMH, she reported, "I made greatest pals at the dinner for me in and Duchess of Athol at Lady Margaret Hall with the Greek tutor. Such a good looking woman, about 30, who went and fetched various translations of Theocritus to compare the passage I love so in the Two Fishermen idyll.

"At that place, I felt most deeply that a chief aim of your life should be to master ancient Greek. The forehand drive is important but, oh, [[Eliz 0:13:15]], with your gift of tongues, gather, gather that rosebud while you are young. Later on, languages become much more difficult.

"Miss Penrose talks it fluently and was urging even me to begin. But Mr Sidgwick, who mysteriously turned up for that dinner, not for the Encaenia, explained that my life was very full."

As for the background to the University's award of the honorary degree to Smyth, this is shrouded in secrecy. Since, and I'm quoting from the University archivist, in an email to me, "The proceedings of the University's hebdomadal council, in accordance with the protocol of the time, maintained a high level of confidentiality over the decision-making process. And I can tell you, that hasn't changed."

What is known is that this particular Encaenia was termed a Chancellor's Encaenia, being the first take place after the installation of a new chancellor of the University. In this case, Viscount Cave.

On these extra-special occasions, the honorands were nominated personally by the newly installed chancellor.

No records of the specific details concerning Viscount Cave's decisions have been found in the University archives, although Smyth herself commented to her great niece that:

"He told me I was his own choice. 'Though of course I consulted musicians,' he added".

Now, behind this even lie a number of vital threads connecting it to the history of the University. Chiefly these are: the role of music in the University; the development of the system of awarding honorary degrees; and the introduction of women into the university environment at Oxford, which after all, had been for so many centuries an all-male institution.

Taking the last of those first. Numbers of resident female undergraduate students had risen from 400 in 1918 to 751 by 1925. Thus, not far short of one woman to four men; a trend that created alarm.

The many centuries of the men's colleges at Oxford stood in stark contrast then to the short history of the women's colleges. Yet, writing in 1923, Elizabeth Wordsworth, the first principal of LMH remarked:

"Already these women's colleges, though they have not yet existed half a century, have begun to feel that they have traditions to maintain; examples to admire and, if possible, imitate; an esprit de corps to live up to; a Sparta to adorn."

The introduction of women students into the collegiate University was a complex process that generated a variety of comment and debate. Often reflecting attitudes to women held in wider society. When Emily Davies, the founder of Girton College, Cambridge, visited Oxford in 1867 to test the possibility of situating her college here, she found that:

"Oxford people brought home to her the difficulty of introducing women students into a university with monastic traditions, rowdy undergraduates, a lively interest in gossip and a large population of prostitutes".

Some 40 years later, DG Hogarth, writing in the Anti-Suffrage Review on the subject of Oxford Degrees for Women summarised the objections raised against the proposal to allow women to take these:

"If women gained the MA, they might enter University politics and become eligible to University offices".

The author comments that, "Some fear this and some do not". But he sees no reason to suppose that their vote and interest will be used less intelligently than those of men.

"Furthermore", Hogarth reported:

"Many doubt how far women can stand the pressure of the courses and terms prescribed for men".

Though, in fact, women in charge of women students themselves expressed no fear on this count.

And many feared also that the increased presence of women, which would inevitably follow if degrees were granted, would disturb the stability of the student community.

"At present, the Oxford boys can be boys without coming into much relation with girls".

Hogarth concluded that since women had already been admitted to Oxford's classrooms and examination halls, the University could hardly, in reason withhold for ever that which constitutes the chief value of its favours to the poorer student – the degree.

The founding of the women's colleges had given the female scholar a place of her own in Oxford. My own college, LMH, was among the earliest of the women's colleges launched in 1878 as a Church of England foundation, although not confining its membership to that denomination.

Now, Ethel Smyth's teenage years coincided with the movement for women's higher education in Oxford. As an early chronicler of LMH, Gemma Bailey put it:

"The 1860s and 70s were years of stirring life and reform in Oxford".

If Ethel Smyth at the age of 19 or 20 had contemplated going to university to study, had she not set her sights on the Leipzig Conservatoire, and had she waited for LMH to open its doors to its first students, she might well have relished the escape from home that Oxford could provide. As Janet Howarth puts it in *The History of the University*:

"An Oxford education gave women freedoms that were for many students undreamt of in their family homes. The study with a door that could be shut against interruptions was the prerogative of the father while control of hospitality rested with the mother".

Winifred Knox, who was at LMH from 1901 to 1905, recalled:

"The glorious freedom of one's own kettle and the novel experience of privacy ensured by the simple expedient of putting up the notice, 'engaged' on one's door".

The women's colleges rapidly acquired the plethora of clubs and societies, including sport, drama, music making, that characterised the male university. Their doings are reported in the *Fritillary*, the magazine of the women's colleges founded at the same date, actually as the male equivalent, *Isis*.

Here we read of the discussion in 1896 by the women's debating society on the motion:

"That fashions in dress are morally and socially injurious".

One woman student claimed that:

"The large sleeves of the present day are a sign of the desire for space in which to develop mentally and physically".

It was in that year, 1896, that a proposal to grant degrees to women was brought before Congregation – the University's parliament – where it was defeated by a large majority.

A recent commentator, [[Christine Ewans 0:21:19]], notes that in the same year, 1896, Isis ran a futuristic satire around the time of the vote on degrees for women entitled *The Diary of a Lady Undergrad, AD1920*. In this imaginary Oxford of the future, women were elected to the presidency of the Oxford Union Society and smoked pipes, among other unfeminine activities. At the same time, they are mocked for missing chapel because they could not finish styling their hair in time.

But if Smyth had come to Oxford as a student in the 1870s, she would in fact have been unable to study music in the modern sense at the University. Just as women were kept on the fringes of the University, not in the mainstream, so music as an academic subject had a Cinderella-like status in comparison with more mainstream, academic disciplines, such as philosophy and theology.

The modern faculty of music did not exist until 1944 under Sir Hugh Allen. And it was only in 1950, under Sir Jack Westrup, that the Honour School of Music offering a residential degree course in the subject, comparable to other arts subjects was finally established.

So it did take us all a long time to become respectable.

The Cinderella-like situation of music at Oxford in the past is exactly the image used by one mid-19th century commentator on the state of music in the University. And this was the Reverend Peter Morris, chaplain of New and All Souls Colleges who reflected in 1856:

"Of all the progeny of alma mater, she, music, alone is allowed to grow up without training and education".

As with the sweeping changes made by the introduction of women students and women tutors in to Oxford, so with the radical changes to the musical degrees in the second half of the 19th century. And these involved a gradual increase in the content and extent of the degree examinations. The process of reform was surrounded by debate and controversy. And we'll just have a few short snapshots of that.

In 1870 an attempt to compel candidates for musical degrees to reside three years in Oxford – and that would have been a total novelty – and to pass all examinations required for a degree in Arts – and so would that – this motion was defeated in Congregation and the *Musical Times* commented:

"It is hardly necessary to point out that this rule would have virtually closed Oxford musical degrees against professional musicians, few of whom can spare the time to pass three years in Oxford".

Later in the century, the great educator, and musical writer, William Henry Hadow – that was William Henry Hadow – my slips of the tongue are really doing their best this morning – waxed eloquent on the subject of the music degrees still-anomalous status. Hadow at that time was at Worcester College for the Worcester men among you. "Under the present system" – or Worcester women, it could be now.

"Under the present system," Hadow wrote, "the connection between musical graduates and the University is restricted to matriculation, the work of the examination room and the ceremony of the degree. Successful candidates bear an Oxford distinction without having contributed anything to Oxford life. Or gained anything from its experience".

At this point, we can bring together women and music in the University. In 1885, a statute was introduced permitting the admission of women to the first examination of the degree of Mus.Bac at Oxford University.

And in 1892, the first two ladies to supplicate for the degree, having passed their final B.Mus examination were congratulated on this distinction in a report in the local press. These pioneering candidates were Emily B Grant and Adelaide Thomas. They were however not allowed to take the degree.

By the 1890s, the examinations for the B.Mus had been developed. This was largely by Frederick Gore Ouseley and then Sir John Stainer, successive Heather Professors of Music. They'd been developed of to lengths undreamt of by earlier professors who simply had to judge candidates' compositions that were sent in as their degree exercises.

By contrast, the 1892 examinations were administered by a panel of examiners and encompassed, besides the candidate's submitted composition, a series of papers in harmony and counterpoint, instrumentation, history of music and set works to be studied in school.

Books recommended for study included Barlioz's Treatise on Instrumentation, [[Bernice 0:26:55]] and Hawkins's great histories of music and Hubert Parry's article on form in Grove's Dictionary.

Another new dimension to the musical degrees developed from the late 18th century onwards. And this was the University's awarding of the D.Mus as an honorary degree to distinguished exponents of the art. The first famous example is to Joseph Haydn on his visit to England in 1791, hence his Oxford Symphony.

And then with the stiffening of the academic requirements for the examined degree in the later 19th century came the establishment of the honorary D.Mus as a regular and distinctive award. So from 1879, with people like Arthur Sullivan in at the start of this, a series of composers of acknowledged international standing received the honorary D.Mus from Oxford. Some of these were similarly honoured by Cambridge.

The tradition of awarding the honorary degree primarily to composers continued into the early 20th century. So besides Smyth in 1926, we have Elgar, 1905, Grieg shortly after, 1906, Glazunov, [[Sonsons 0:28:10]] in 1907, and Richard Strauss, interestingly, in 1914.

From 1920, when women were finally permitted to take their degrees, and as Annie Rogers put it in her book Degrees by Degrees, the University was now free to confer special honours on



distinguished women. They did.

In May 1921, Queen Mary was offered and accepted the honorary degree of DCL. On her visit, the queen met students from the five women's societies and inspected and criticised the domestic arrangements at LMH.

In June 1925, the honorary DSC was conferred on Miss Annie Cannon, a distinguished American astronomer on the suggestion of Professor HH Turner, "who had once been so strong an opponent of the admission of women to the University that he at one time refused to admit them to his lectures". And that's a quote from Annie Rogers. That was the professor, the Civilian Professor of Astronomy, Professor Turner.

So all of this then is the background to that splendid day when Smyth referred to what she thought of as her privileged to wear the handsomest of all the Oxford doctors' gowns.

So, women composers at Oxford. For my concluding section, I might have surveyed the women composers who, unlike Smyth, studied at Oxford. These would have included the lesser-known, such as Greta Tomlins who was at LMH from 1931 to 34 and I know actually from a recent conversation with somebody at a conference, that her choral compositions at least are still in the repertoire. Or the more well-known such as Nicola LeFanu, Professor of Music at York University and daughter of the composer Elizabeth Maconchy. Nicola read music St Hilda's in the 1960s. She was just in the year ahead of me.

I've chosen instead though to take a personal angle at this point. And I'm now going to condense extremely a story that actually stretches over several decades.

The 1960s are where I want to begin.

As a new undergraduate at LMH, I still remember vividly, I brought with me some of the basic items of recommended reading. Among them Apel and Davison's *Historical Anthology of Music*.

It was only many years later that I realised that its title would more properly have read, *Historical Anthology of Music by Men*. And that my history essays, the analyses that I had to construct, reliant as they were on the available books and anthologies were totally dominated by writing about 'he' and 'his' music.

It was only as a university lecturer that I woke up in the 1990s to the realisation that something was missing from what I'd studied and from what I was now teaching in music history and analysis courses. And that something was there to be discovered. If only I could find it. And that something was women composers.

I embarked on a wonderful voyage of discovery. There was so much that had been hidden. Who invented the genre of songs without words? We asked ourselves. Turns out it wasn't necessarily Felix Mendelssohn. It may have been his sister, Fanny. But actually, more likely, it was a joint enterprise. They studied together – perhaps I should take this off now because I'm going to go to the keyboard. It's been sitting there waiting.

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