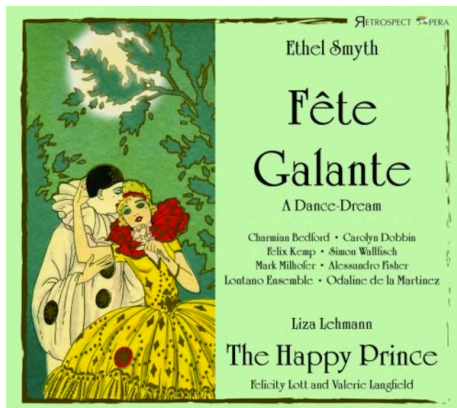


Odaline de la Martinez conducts debut recording of
Ethel Smyth's *Fête Galante* with Retrospect Opera
Marking 75th anniversary of the suffragette composer's death



15 November 2019
RO007 | Retrospect Opera

Simon Wallfisch King
Mark Milhofer The Lover
Charmian Bedford Columbine
Alessandro Fisher Harlequin
Carolyn Dobbin Queen
Felix Kemp Pierrot
Odaline de la Martinez conductor
Lontano Ensemble

"It was your music that cured me for ever of the old delusion that women could not do man's work in art and all other things"

George Bernard Shaw to Ethel Smyth

Marking the **75th anniversary** of the remarkable suffragette composer's death in 2019, **Retrospect Opera** releases the first complete recording of **Ethel Smyth's *Fête Galante***, conducted by **Odaline de la Martinez** and her **Lontano Ensemble**. Martinez, who in 1984 became the first woman to conduct at the BBC Proms, is a renowned Smyth interpreter, and has long championed the composer's work, first reintroducing the Smyth to the public eye with a performance of Smyth's *The Wreckers* at the 1994 BBC Proms that was later released on disc.

Martinez's latest recording of Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate* in 2016 received high acclaim. Three singers also feature on the forthcoming disc: **Mark Milhofer**, **Carolyn Dobbin** and **Alessandro Fisher**, now alongside **Simon Wallfisch**, **Charmian Bedford**, and **Felix Kemp**.

With *Fête Galante*, Martinez will now have released half of Smyth's operatic output on **Retrospect Opera**, committing to disc a portion of Smyth's repertoire that has long been overlooked. Next year, Martinez will release Smyth's *Four Songs*, and she has also recorded orchestral works by Smyth, including her *Symphonic Serenade* and *Double Concerto*.



The one-act ***Fête Galante*** first premiered in 1923 after a commission from the British National Opera. Subtitled a 'dance-dream', *Fête Galante* was one of the most successful operas composed by Smyth, and soon found new life outside the opera house as an orchestral suite and a ballet. Smyth's work garnered such respect that the opera had reached the stage at Covent Garden within a month.

With a libretto co-written with war poet **Edward Shanks**, the opera is based on a short story by writer and friend **Maurice Baring**. *Fête Galante* tells the tale of a frivolous late night party involving aristocrats and a troupe of artists, one that turns sinister. A comic tale of mistaken identity and disguise draws on the *commedia dell'arte* tradition like Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* to mask a much darker story of royal deceit, ambiguity, and masquerade.



Fête Galante had a difficult gestation. A few years previously, Smyth had noticed a decline in her hearing, and by 1920 the problem had worsened considerably. She spent several months avoiding starting work on her commission.

*"This music is like our love –
Lilting and soft, but with an undercurrent
Of sorrow and bitterness to come"*
Fête Galante libretto, by Smyth and Shanks

Ethel Smyth is most noted as a composer today for her six operatic works performed widely across Europe during her life. Her 1902 *Der Wald* was the first opera by a woman to be performed at Covent Garden and at the Metropolitan Opera, and for more than 100 years, the only opera composed by a woman to be performed in either. In opposition to her family's wishes, Smyth went to Leipzig to study composition in 1877, where she met Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Grieg, and Clara Schumann.



However, she soon returned to England and devoted herself to the suffragette movement, spending two months in prison for throwing rocks at the windows of politicians who did not support votes for women. Her *The March of the Women* became the anthem of the women's suffrage movement, which she once fearlessly conducted through an open prison window with a toothpick, an incident recounted by Thomas Beecham.

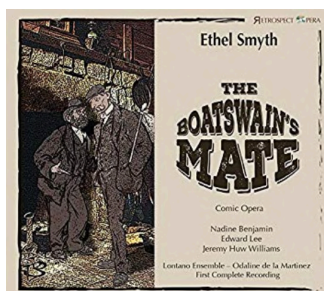
In other aspects of her extraordinary life, she also worked as a radiographer in France during the First World War, and she was a prolific autobiographer, writing no less than ten books after deafness forced her to give up composition. She was made a Dame in 1922, and took pride of place alongside royalty at a Festival celebrating her 75th Birthday in 1934, masterminded by Sir Thomas Beecham, although by this point, Smyth was profoundly deaf and could no longer hear a note of her work.

*"The exact worth of my music will probably not be known till nought
remains of the writer but sexless dots and lines on ruled paper."*

Ethel Smyth, 1928

Just a year younger than Elgar, Smyth's work began to receive public attention before the end of the nineteenth century. However, in contrast to Elgar, and as was noted even in her own lifetime by those who had heard her works, Smyth was repeatedly omitted from the consciousness of the musical public, a lapse which she attributed to being a woman composer.

The Boatswain's Mate (2016)



Disc of the month, Opera Magazine: *"This beautifully presented premiere recording of Smyth's fourth and most performed opera, conducted with infectious brio by her loyal champion Odaline de la Martinez"*

★★★★, BBC Music Magazine: *"Smyth's chamber scoring [is] superbly dispatched by De La Martinez's forces."*

Musical Opinion Quarterly: *"This recording, a wholly remarkable achievement, should be in the collection of everyone interested in British music. [...] one cannot imagine it being better done."*

Odaline de la Martinez Conductor and composer



The award-winning Cuban American composer-conductor Odaline de la Martinez is one of Britain's most dynamic and gifted musicians. Through the years she has established an international reputation as one of the most exciting and versatile pioneers of 20th and 21st century music. In 1984 Martinez became the first woman in history to conduct a BBC Promenade Concert at the Royal Albert Hall, and 1987 she was awarded the Villa Lobos medal from the Brazilian government in recognition of her outstanding work promoting and conducting his music. Martinez was made a fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in 1990, and to this

day she is in demand throughout the world both as an orchestra and opera conductor, and with her ensemble Lontano.

Her conducting repertoire ranges from Mozart symphonies to the latest contemporary music. Since the late 1990s, Martinez has focused more on her composing work, with much success in writing opera. *'Imoinda': A Story of Love and Slavery* is her second opera, after her first opera *Sister Aimée*, which she wrote after winning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1980. In 2014 she was composer in residence at Tulane University, New Orleans, and composer/artist in residence at the University of Arizona in Tucson. In 2015, together with Lontano, Martinez completed residences at MIT and SUNY at Binghamton.

Martinez founded **Lontano**, her chamber ensemble, in 1976 whilst studying composition at the Royal Academy of Music, and the ensemble's impact on the perception of new music has been profound and enduring. With Lontano she commissions, produces, performs and records with the primary aim of bringing to the fore the work of living contemporary composers, female composers from all periods, and Latin American classical music. The ensemble's sphere of activity includes contemporary opera, music theatre, concerts, workshops, education projects, tours, broadcasts and recordings.

Always at the front of music innovation, Martinez' ensemble was one of the first ensembles to form its own record company when in 1992 it established the LORELT label. Now with a catalogue of 41 recordings, LORELT features soloists as well as other ensembles and is noted for its archive of important and often neglected compositions. Odaline de la Martinez is also trustee of The Mornington Trust, who together with Lontano has been responsible community and educational work in Waltham Forest and other London boroughs since 2000. Presently the charity is involved in an eight-year project working with Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities in the East of London.

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