Do You Hear the Women Sing?

An Exploration of Female-Composed Choral Music Centering on Women's Suffrage

Sarah Gould

Choral Literature

Over the past 200 years, women have made immense contributions to the world of choral composition. As with many women who have placed pen to paper, the contributions of female composers are vast, even if they have only recently begun to be fully recognized. Women of the past would write under masculine pen names or publish with anonymity. Even women such as Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn, with status, respect, and a history as a prodigious performer, struggled to make a name as a composer in music. Female composers have highlighted topics of great importance in their work, especially women's rights. Their music shaped the times, inspiring and rallying suffrage movements across the world. One of the first notable women to spark the movement was Ethyl Smyth, but she was not alone in using her musical virtuosity to make a statement for what she believed. Composers in the twentieth century, such as Undine Smith Moore, Margaret Bonds, and Alice Parker, found ways to pursue degrees, work with highly successful composers, and publish their work. Female composers of today stand on the backs of these trailblazers. Andrea Ramsey's *Suffrage Cantata* covers historic moments in the American women's suffrage movement, and an analysis of its contents prove that much inspiration was drawn for Ramsey to compose such a prolific piece. The impact these works have had and will continue to have on women's suffrage and female empowerment is long-lasting, if we continue to program this influential music.

In July of 1848, approximately 200 women and 100 of their allies met in Seneca Falls, New York for the first women's rights convention. The movement was sparked by Lecretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who were inspired by the actions taken by numerous women frustrated with their treatment as second- and third-class citizens. The first documented woman to attempt to place a ballot in a voting box was in 1648. 200 years later, women held nearly the same number of rights as that first brave voter. Over the following seventy-five years, women

across the nation met, marched, protested, and sang their way through the streets of America, fighting for their voices to be heard. Wyoming (in 1869), Utah (in 1870), and Washington (in 1883) heard these rally cries and, though only territories of the country at the time, were the first to grant women this basic human right. The Nineteenth Amendment, granting white women rights to the ballot box, was passed in 1920, but a woman's right to represent in the same offices she was voting for remained out of reach.[1] The documentary, *VOTE*, stated, "Suffragists have to change the idea of what women's role in society will be."[2] Now that there was a new amendment, women had to use it to continue raising their voice, and what better way than through song? Female composers of choral music cover a vast literature within their work, and many choose to use their platforms to create music intended to invoke peace, change, and justice.

Today, scholars recognize German composer Fanny Hensel Mendelssohn (1805-1847) as one of the most prolific [female] composers of the nineteenth century. Audiences celebrated her contributions as a performer during her lifetime, but only in recent decades have critics greeted her compositional contributions with delight and acclaim, rather than with the shame once felt by her family and society. "Hensel's emergence as the central character of a feminist cautionary tale, an unrecognized genius whose talents were suppressed by her family, was part of the widespread discourse about women's intellectual abilities that emerged in the late nineteenth century."[3] Aside from pieces attributed to her brother that she very likely in part composed, Hensel wrote twenty-eight choral works, including one oratorio and two cantatas. Her most popular choral

---

[1] Roslyn Leigh Brandes, "'Let Us Sing as We Go': The Role of Music in the United States Suffrage Movement" (Master's thesis, University of Maryland, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2016), 16.
[2] The Vote, part 1, American Experience, season 32, episode 9, directed by Michelle Ferrari, aired July 6, 2020, on PBS, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/vote/, 2:20.
[3] Marian Wilson Kimber, "Not Without a Grievance: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Suffrage Movement, and the Reception of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel," *College Music Symposium* 64, no. 2 (2024): 31, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48797097.

piece is a set of six part-songs titled *Gartenlieder* (1846).[4] Though she was lesser known for these choral works than for her instrumental music, Hensel's contributions as a female composer paved the way for successors to come, whether she intended to serve as a symbol or not. Marian Wilson Kimber notes, "Hensel's portrayal as a repressed genius had as much to do with the ways in which she came to serve as a symbol within the era's suffrage-related discourse about women's abilities and status as with musical developments in the United States."[5] Even her best male contemporaries could not dispute her work during a deeply unsettling time within the era of women's suffrage, both stateside and across Europe.

Fanny Hensel paved the way for notable composers such as Clara Schumann (1819-1896), Amy Beach (1867-1944), and Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) to publish choral music at the turn of the century. Amy Beach composed a large number of choral pieces, and scholars believe one of them, "Festival Jubilate," was the first commissioned piece by an American female composer. The choral-orchestral cantata was "performed at the dedication ceremonies of the Women's Building at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893."[6] While the work itself does not address women's suffrage, Beach composed it for an event whose very existence as the first commission for an American female is innately empowering.

One of the most prolific and outspoken female composers during the time of women's suffrage was Ethyl Smyth (1858-1944). Smyth was an active English writer of both music and literature, often collaborating with famous, progressive writer Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). The two encouraged each other's work as women in male-dominated fields. Christopher Wiley explains, "Smyth's writings often detail the discrimination she experienced as a woman

---

[4] Matthew Hoch and Linda Lister, "Choral Music Composed by Women: A Brief History," *The Choral Journal* 59, no. 10 (2019): 10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26662748.
[5] Kimber, "Not Without a Grievance," 33.
[6] Kimber, "Not Without a Grievance," 11.

composer, and how she and her work suffered at the hands of the coterie of power-wielding decision makers to whom she collectively referred as the Inner Circle, the Group, the Elders, or the Machine."[7] Smyth was well aware of female composers like Fanny Mendelssohn; however, she intentionally distanced herself from them, wanting to prove her credibility and talent among great male composers.

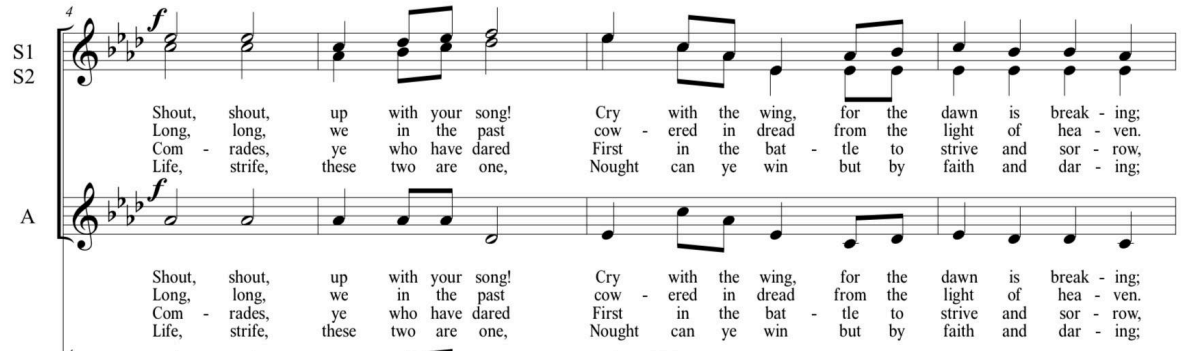
Clara Schumann deeply inspired Smyth, who befriended her while living in Germany, though Smyth credited her more as a pianist, wife, and mother than as a composer. Smyth did not necessarily dislike the music of other women, but perhaps wanted critics to take her more seriously and consider her work comparable with male contemporaries. Beethoven's music heavily influenced her, and she spent a decade studying and composing in Germany, where her governess encouraged Smyth to attend the Leipzig Conservatory.[8] Wood writes, "Through her study in Germany and her admiration for Beethoven and Brahms, Smyth was well versed in the conventions of the musical patriarchy she was to subvert in her own output."[9] Returning to England, Smyth made a name for herself by composing operas, orchestral music, one mass, and most famously, vocal music related to the women's suffrage movement. Her oratorio, *The Prison*, leaned on her own experience being incarcerated for two months during her efforts as a suffragette. She used music to express her "voracious appetite for feminist change."[10] Women in the United Kingdom gained the right to vote a mere two years prior to America, though with strict stipulations involving age and property qualifications. All British women gained the right to vote in 1928. Smyth composed vocal music because the lyrics communicated her political

---

[7] Christopher Wiley, "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2013): 273, https://doi.org/10.1093/musqtl/gdt012.
[8] Elizabeth Wood, "Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth: A Pathway in the Politics of Music," *The Massachusetts Review* 24, no. 1 (1983): 267, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25089403.
[9] Wood, "Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth," 268.
[10] Trevor Rand Nelson, "The Dissident Dame: Alternative Feminist Methodologies and the Music of Ethel Smyth" (PhD diss., Michigan State University, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2016), 60.

efforts and allowed untrained singers to participate.[11] Musicians rarely perform her work today, partly because "rebuking and redefining of stylistic conventions might come at the price of performances and critical acclaim, but the payoffs of inspired political change are astounding."[12] One work, however, that choral ensembles still highly favor is "March of the Women."

Ethyl Smyth composed "March of the Women" in 1910 as the rallying cry of the British Women's Suffrage movement. The song premiered in 1911 to celebrate the release of imprisoned activists. Smyth scored the piece for four voices and band in G Major and it is relatively simple and accessible. The piece is strophic, repeating the same melody over four verses, and functions like a hymn.



Example 1. Ethyl Smyth, "March of the Women," mm. 4-6.[13]

Verse one introduces strength and excitement for the suffrage movement with the lyrics "March, march, swing you along, Wide blows our banner, and hope is waking."[14] Verse two shows the resilience and fervor with which many women fight: "Strength with its beauty, life with its duty" and "Open your eyes to the blaze of the day."[15] Verse three speaks of the struggles

[11] Nelson, "The Dissident Dame," 60.
[12] Nelson, "The Dissident Dame," 66.
[13] Ethel Smyth, "The March of the Women" (Chappell & Co., 1911).
[14] Smyth, "The March of the Women"
[15] Smyth, "The March of the Women."

women face, especially in the suffrage movement. It recognizes their challenges, and the women who paved the way thus far: "Ways that are weary, days that are dreary, Toil and pain by faith ye are born."[16] Verse four ends with a message encouraging them "on, on" and stating, "March, march many as one, shoulder to shoulder and friend to friend."[17] The structure mixes the more conventionally masculine marching style with unusual melodic phrasing. The music's complete homophony emphasizes the power of voices singing together as one. Additionally, if suffragists were marching in the streets, the unified nature of the music made the song easier to sing. Not only does this song musically reflect the struggle women faced throughout the suffrage movement, but it also became an anthem of resilience for those who sang it.

Music played a very active role in the women's suffrage movement, and suffrage events frequently featured musical performances. From the Seneca Convention onward, leaders of the movement encouraged that "contemporary social issues be expressed musically, rather than just verbally."[18] Historians often disregard music of this time and consider it insignificant, in part because of its lack of prolific style. However, the intent of suffrage music was to empower its marchers and protesters, to unify believers of the movement, to foster community, and to signify the place of women in society, through song. Publishers printed most songs in songbooks, collections, newspapers, and as individual copies. These songs took the form of hymn tunes, or used previously existing patriotic music. Many song titles blatantly stated the goals of the lyrics in the songs, such as "Give the Ballot to the Mothers" or "Help Us Win the Vote." Suffragists sang music that resembled the works women played and sang independently, such as music performed in the parlor by amateur musicians. Roslyn Leigh Brandes explains, "The songs usually had unsophisticated lyrics, strophic poetic forms, simple melodies and harmonies, and

[16] Smyth, "The March of the Women."
[17] Smyth, "The March of the Women."
[18] Brandes, "'Let Us Sing as We Go,'" 2.

keyboard accompaniments that were designed to sound virtuosic while actually requiring minimal technique."[19] Music drew women into the movement, and many suffragists learned the goals of the movement through song lyrics. At the time, society considered it unladylike for women to play band instruments, hence the lack of marching bands playing for parades and marches, because it was believed playing wind instruments would affect their appearance.[20] Therefore, they turned to song.

Throughout the twentieth century, women engaged in music making to share important messages and find empowerment. Margaret Bonds (1913-1972), a prolific African American composer, used her platform and talent to compose works influenced by women's and civil rights. Bonds acted as an "unswerving voice to the quest for racial justice, gender justice, and global equality."[21] Her existence alone, as a female black composer of the twentieth century, represents resilience. The circumstances in which she found herself composing were challenging enough, yet she chose subject matter impactful to the female black experience. John Michael Cooper notes that "the chances of Black folk being able to persuade the United States' patently White male dominated culture of classical music to accept major orchestral and choral works by a Black woman were as small as those works themselves were manifestly brilliant."[22] While Bonds composed numerous impactful works, her *Credo* stands out because she drew its text from the ideas of W.E.B Dubois. The work expands on his ideas, while considering her own experiences of racial and gender injustice. *Credo* fuses music from the Western classical tradition with African American spirituals, becoming one of the first major works of its kind to exist and be performed in major concert halls. Bonds would have been aware that most musicians

---

[19] Brandes, "'Let Us Sing as We Go,'" 41-42.
[20] Brandes, "'Let Us Sing as We Go,'" 88-89.
[21] John Michael Cooper, *Margaret Bonds: The Montgomery Variations and Du Bois "Credo,"* 1st ed. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2024), xxi.
[22] Cooper, *Margaret Bonds*, 147.

performing her works, inspired by her lived experiences, would be primarily white and male. She knew "that was a formidable challenge, for concepts such as *integration* and *feminism* were subjects of heated political and artistic debate."[23]

Undine Smith Moore (1904-1989), known for an oratorio, two cantatas, and spirituals, wrote an arrangement of "We Shall Walk Through the Valley in Peace," which became its own kind of rallying cry during the Civil Rights Movement. The name Alice Parker (1925-2023) is synonymous with choral singing and stands as one of the most influential composers (and collaborators of Robert Shaw) of the modern age of female composition. Current popular choral composers, such as Jocelyn Hagen, Elaine Hagenburg, Susan Labarr, Rosephanye Powell, Andrea Ramsey, and M.E. Valverde, stand on the backs of these greats. The struggles women endured to have their music sung and voices heard deeply influenced today's composers.

American composer Andrea Ramsey (1977-) grew up in rural Arkansas where imagination was her best form of entertainment. She has made a name for herself primarily as a choral composer and clinician, using text as the launching pad for discussion and empowerment in her music. Ramsey has stated, "My primary consideration when I write, whether for women, men, or mixed ensembles, is the text. That single element dictates the work to me, certain words have flashes of color, require emphasis or special attention. Climactic moments in the text drive climactic moments in the music.[24] One piece I sang under Ramsey's direction at the 2013 Georgia All State choir, "Letter from a Girl to the World" stuck with me so deeply that I programmed it as a first-year middle school choir director. Her music embodies the same goals as the music of Ethyl Smyth: the music and text marry to create a powerful and transformative musical experience. Ramsey continued, "'Any text that gives women the opportunity to express

[23] Cooper, *Margaret Bonds*, 152.
[24] Sandra L. Mathias, "Meet the Composer: Andrea Ramsey," *Kodály Envoy* 41, no. 4 (2015), 6–7.

strength, be confident, authentic, positive, etc. – those are the texts that command my attention… I know my ear gravitates toward certain colors, melodic patterns, and rhythmic ideas.'"[25] Inspired by her desire to create more extended works for treble choir, Ramsey set out on a multi–year research journey to compose the *Suffrage Cantata*.

The *Suffrage Cantata* (2020) commemorates the powerful work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Susan B. Anthony, and imprisoned suffragists. Ramsey felt that writing a work about these iconic figures "might be a great opportunity to have women singing about a history that often is erased from our textbooks, and that we don't know as much about as we should."[26] In a typical trajectory of history lessons a child learns in school, teachers may cover the Nineteenth Amendment in a short lesson for one day of American government, even though it was a movement that spanned longer than seven decades. These women were not perfect, and Ramsey recognized their faults in her writing. She actively considered the impact and influence of the women she references in her work, while also recognizing their flaws, namely racism and classicism. In the performance notes about the *Suffrage Cantata*, Ramsey states,

> This work is about a distinct moment in history, but it was also composed during a critical moment in history. The music and texts capture the struggle for suffrage among women who were separated by the color line, but united in an understanding of the importance of women having the capacity to participate as full and equal citizens. Just as the women involved in suffrage raised their voices, artists must also make their desires for a better world clear, and that is why we implore you to involve singers who embody the women characterized in this work as authentically as possible, so that audiences can connect to the conflicts and triumphs of the road to suffrage.[27]

Ramsey based the bulk of the text for this thirty-five minute, five-movement work on speeches, banner messages, programs, writings, and suffragist letters from 1870-1920. In her

---

[25] Mathias, "Meet the Composer," 7.
[26] Andrea Ramsey, "Composer Andrea Ramsey on Her Inspiration for the Suffrage Cantata," YouTube video, 3:07, posted May 14, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2SluS_399U, 0:29.
[27] Andrea Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata* (Hal Leonard, 2020).

year of research, Ramsey visited notable landmarks, exhibits, and held important letters, piecing together a narrative with which not only she as the composer could connect, but also a narrative that would provide a fruitful experience for the musicians and audience. The narration, voiced by a powerful individual, shares historical context that otherwise might have been too bulky for song form. When singing and narration happen in tandem, Ramsey made the musical phrasing easy to listen to as background for focusing on the narrator's text. Occasionally, narration layers over a repeated melody so the audience can hear the theme multiple times. The lyrics draw from extensive source material, and the following section highlights key moments.

Movement 1 ("It Is Coming") sources its text from Ernestine Rose (1851), Lucy Stone (circa 1856), and Lydia Maria Child's 1838 letter to Angelina Grimké.[28] Ramsey quotes Sojourner Truth's 1853 speech at Broadway Tabernacle in New York City, in which she declared "But we'll have our rights…and you can't stop us from them…you may hiss as much as you like, but it's coming."[29] From a longer text deploring her frustrations on the equality (or lack there of) of the sexes, Sarah Grimké wrote, "All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy."[30] To think, even for a second, that society symbolically spat on these women for lack of intelligence, thoughtfulness, or care for society, is reprehensible when reading their words. The first narration, starting in 1830, emphatically recognizes "not the degradation being what God made woman, but what man has made her."[31] Then, a new section describes the very beginnings of the women's suffrage movement.

[28] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[29] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[30] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[31] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.

Movement 2 (“Failure Is Impossible”) recalls the trial of Susan B. Anthony, in response to her attempt to vote in the 1872 presidential election. Ramsey uses an in-depth essay by Autumn Haag, in charge of the Susan B. Anthony archives at University of Rochester, as well as Anthony’s own speech, “Is it a Crime for a U.S. Citizen to Vote?”[32] to depict how the court room would have sounded, looked, and felt.

Ramsey took more creative liberty in the lyric creation for movement 3 (“A Woman’s Place”), quoting Zena S. Hawn’s 1914 Suffrage March “Fall in Line,” which scholars believe was possibly performed at the 1913 Washington D.C. suffrage parade. In her composer notes, Ramsey clarified, “The original lyrics in movement 3 were crafted to relay stories from Ida B. Wells’s autobiography ‘Crusade for Justice’ as well as textbook accounts of the events within the Illinois delegation on the day of the 1913 parade in Washington D.C.”[33] She poured over journalistic evidence and images of the time to craft lyrics for this middle movement.

Movement 4 (“Shall Not Be Denied”) draws its text from voices such as Mabel Ping-Hua Lee (from her 1912 speech “China’s Submerged Half”), Alice Paul (1919), Inez Milholland Boissevain (in her 1913 “Appeal to the Women Voters of the West”), and from National Woman’s Party “Silent Sentinel” banner messages.[34] She also quotes Daisy Elizabeth Adams Lampkin who in 1918 declared, “You cannot be neutral. You must either join with us who believe in the bright future, or be destroyed by those who would return us to the dark past.”[35] Movement 4 also deals with the experiences of women imprisoned for raising their voices in attempts at justice—first-hand accounts from the Occoquan Workhouse and the District Jail (1917-1919) that imprisoned suffragist Doris Stevens later compiled in her book “Jailed for

[32] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata.*
[33] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[34] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[35] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.

Freedom." Imprisoned women sang powerful lyrics such as "Shout the revolution of women… for liberty… Triumphant daughters pressing to victory," to the tune of a Scottish folksong to keep their spirits alive and pass the time in a workhouse.[36]

The final movement ("Forward Into Light") references women such as Inez Milholland Boissevain (from the message on her banner in a march), Jovita Idár (from "La Cronica", ~1911-1915), Carrie Chapman Catt (from her opening speech at the NAWSA convention, 1920), Mrs. J. L. Burn (from a letter to her politician son, Harry T. Burn, 1920), and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper ("Woman's Political Future," 1854).[37] Ramsey also quotes Mary Church Terrell's speeches from 1920, in which she implored, "We women now have a weapon of defense which we have never possessed before. It will be a shame and reproach to us if we do not use it,"[38] and from her 1898 speech, "The Progress of Colored Women." In the latter, Terrell proclaimed that women are "Lifting as we climb" which became the adopted motto of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. The choir sings part of the final text, "'Forward out of darkness, Leave behind the night, Forward out of error, Forward into light," quoting Boissevain who continually proclaimed this hopeful message as she marched in the 1911 New York City Suffrage Parade.[39]

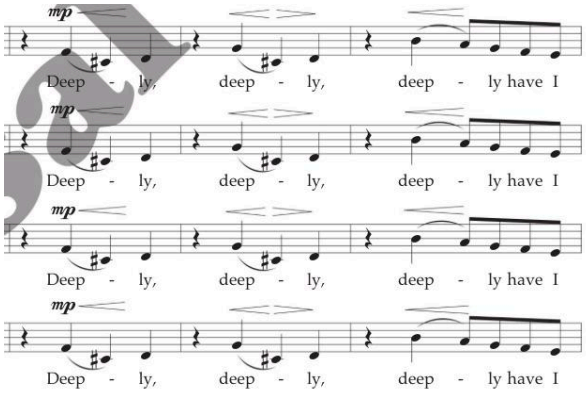
The storyline Ramsey carries throughout the entire piece is one of struggle, resilience, and pursuit. Beginning with the pillars of the suffrage movement's genesis, and tracing the path of the women is genius. Providing details of Susan B. Anthony's trial and accounts of women's experiences in prison supplies context to history often ignored in classroom curriculums. Including the perspectives of women of color highlights the injustices these suffragists faced

[36] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[37] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[38] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.
[39] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.

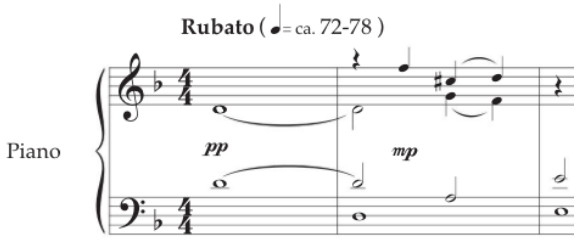
beyond the 1920 amendment ratification. It is quite feasible to imagine that a majority of American women singing the *Suffrage Cantata* can trace their female heritage back a century, to the time when their female ancestors were only beginning to experience a sense of empowered citizenship. Over the past century, the choral canon for larger treble masterworks has slowly expanded, but Ramsey's *Suffrage Cantata* is one of the first pieces to combine such significant history with a contemporary musical language that is relatable and accessible to treble singers today.

Ramsey's musical choices perfectly complement the texts that she carefully chose. A four-part treble chorus performs the *Suffrage Cantata* with piano, string quartet, and percussion. Ramsey sprinkles soloists throughout the work to represent powerful figures such as Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell. Movement 1 focuses on the perspectives of the early women involved in the movement. The choir sings the opening phrase, "Deeply have I felt the degradation of being a woman,"[40] in a beautiful unison descending line that demonstrates Ramsey's ability to unify voices through their shared frustration. This striking use of text painting bemoans the weight of nineteenth-century womanhood and sets the dynamic for which Ramsey continues throughout the work. She often introduces phrases in unison to show unity and power, then repeats that phrase in harmony. Movement 1 begins with the tempo marking "Rubato," which translates to "stolen" or "robbed," further reflecting the emotions women felt in that era.

[40] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.



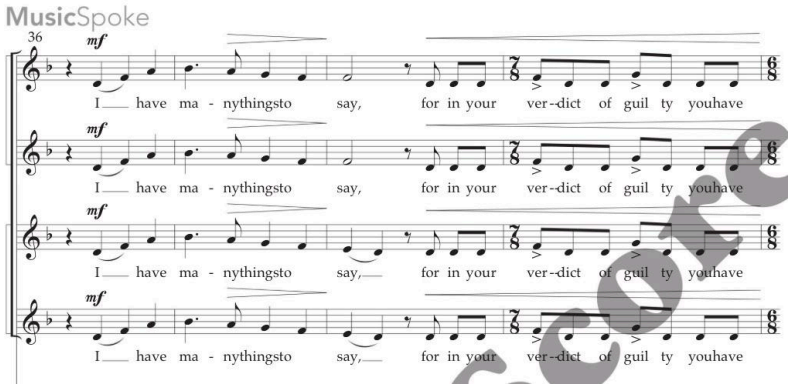
Example 2. Andrea Ramsey, "It Is Coming," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 8-10.[41]



Example 3. Andrea Ramsey, "It Is Coming," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 1-2.[42]

Movement 2 examines the illegal voting, arrest, and trial of Susan B. Anthony. Ramsey writes the music to mimic how one may expect Anthony to have delivered her speech—with impassioned accents on words she would have spat with vigor.[43] Ramsey's use of articulation is very intentional, especially when she accents phrases she imagines being spoken with extreme conviction and diction. After the narrator shares that the court denied Anthony any chance to speak until the end of her trial, the choir sings her first uttered phrases in unison, to convey her thoughts clearly and succinctly to the judge and jury.

[41] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 1.
[42] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 1.
[43] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.

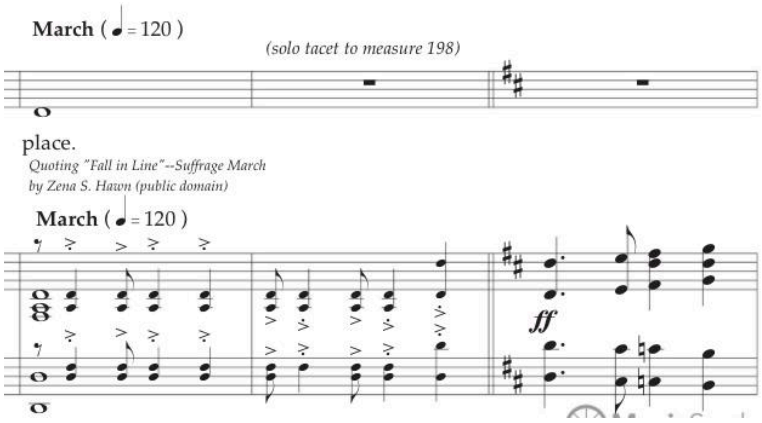


Example 4. Andrea Ramsey, "Failure Is Impossible," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 36-39.[44]

The choir sings the final portion of this movement powerfully, yet quietly, representing Susan B. Anthony's later reflections, as she reaches the end of her life, when her body may have weakened, but her spirit had not.

The third movement highlights Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the 1913 Women's Suffrage Procession in Washington D.C. The song begins with a solo that expresses the perspectives of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Susan B. Anthony. These solos function almost as recitative, emphasizing rhythm and text more than melody. The song then transitions to chorus, accompanied by a rhythmic and homophonic instrumental march with snare drum, before shifting to the more traditional suffragist song style.[45]

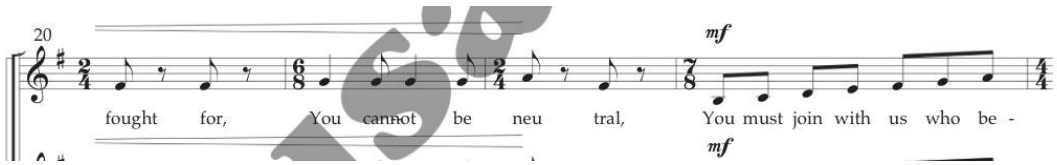
[44] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 26.
[45] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*.



Example 5. Andrea Ramsey, "A Woman's Place," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 103-105.[46]

Ramsey cleverly uses instrumentation to mimic a parade march, seamlessly weaving Zena Hawn's historic suffragist song, "Fall in Line," into the movement's framework, even though society typically forbade women from marching in parade bands. Instead, Ramsey introduces the audience to the march style of suffragist women singing in the streets of Washington D.C.

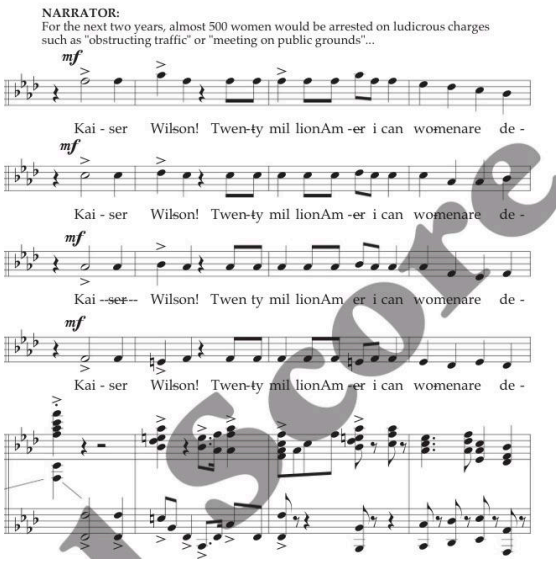
Movement 4 centers on the silent sentinels, arrest, imprisonment, and abuse suffragists faced. Ramsey uses irregular meters and frequent meter changes to represent unrest and to mimic the text in the movement.



Example 6. Andrea Ramsey, "Shall Not Be Denied," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 20-23.[47]

[46] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 39.
[47] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 52.

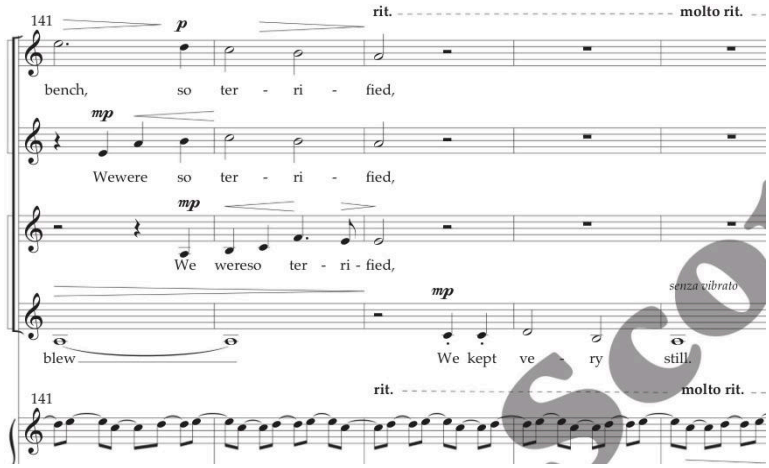
A key change from G Major to A-flat Major in measure 80 symbolizes women's attempt to have their voices heard as they sought the attention of President Woodrow Wilson—nicknaming him "Kaiser Wilson," because he fought for America's freedom in WWI, but not for the women's freedom at home.



Example 7. Andrea Ramsey, "Shall Not Be Denied," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 80-83.[48]

The mood shifts completely to a minor key, as the text begins describing the experiences of imprisoned suffragists. Additionally, the dynamic markings suggest that although the women never stopped fighting, they remained cognizant of the horrors that could result from resisting too forcefully behind bars. The choir sings, "We were so terrified" at a piano dynamic, and "We kept very still" very low, quietly, and slowly.

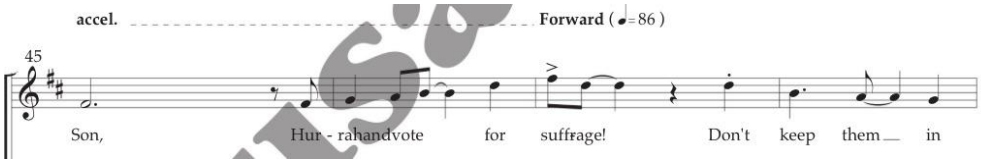
[48] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 58.



Example 8. Andrea Ramsey, "Shall Not Be Denied," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 141-145.[49]

Upon the release of the imprisoned women, they do not immediately begin shouting; instead, the sound slowly grows from piano to fortissimo over twenty measures. The women want their voices heard, but they also recognize the power of silence.

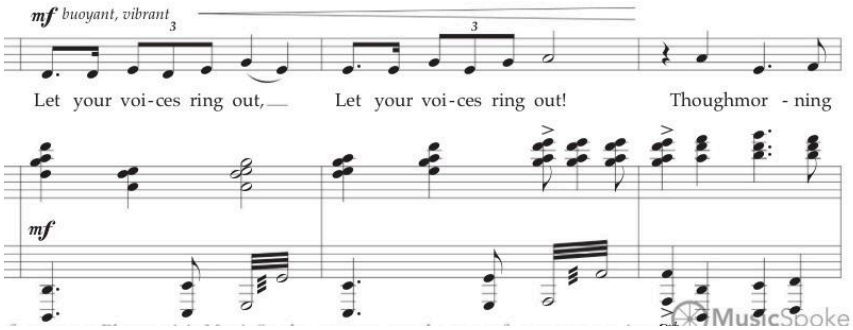
Movement 5 invokes hope, focusing on the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment and the journey forward. In measure 45, Ramsey introduces a beautiful section using text a mother wrote to her son, an anti-suffrage legislator. The music shifts to mimic a mother's voice as Ramsey shapes the tone to be more gentle, legato, and waltz-like, to reflect his mother's tender plea for him to support women's suffrage.



Example 9. Andrea Ramsey, "Forward Into Light," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 45-48.[50]

[49] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata,* 64.
[50] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 74.

The mood then shifts back to the chorale-like structure of the suffragist song from movement 3, celebrating the nationwide achievement of women's right to vote!



Example 10. Andrea Ramsey, "Forward Into Light," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 69-71.[51]

Ramsey easily could have ended here, but she astutely recognized that ratification was not the end of women's suffrage. The narrator goes on to share perspectives from black, Asian, and indigenous women who still lacked the rights of their white contemporaries. The piece concludes with a hopeful and encouraging message to move forward and lift as we climb.

The work of suffragists deeply influenced Andrea Ramsey to write the *Suffrage Cantata*. A consortium of choirs from a variety of backgrounds, including high school, collegiate, community, and professional settings were the first to perform the cantata. While no research directly connects Ramsey's inspiration to Smyth's music, specifically with "March of the Women," her compositional choices suggest that influence. Ramsey fulfills Smyth's goals, a woman who during her time did not favor other female composers because of her want to "fit in" with "successful" [male] composers, by composing on a level that all revere and respect. While Ramsey has conceived a wide array of empowering treble chorus music, she has composed beyond these confines for multi-gendered choirs as well as written choral-orchestral works. Many female-identifying choruses now commission new works that align with their values rather

[51] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 77.

than performing the limited pre-nineteenth-century repertoire composed for treble, non-boy choir voices. De Quadros recognizes, "The diversity of women's choruses around the world parallels that of SATB choruses, but women's choruses have paved a way in terms of linking their repertoire, practice, and organizational models to social action and spiritual calling."[52] Treble ensembles such as these—and the many female conductors who lead them—exist today because suffragists made their work possible.

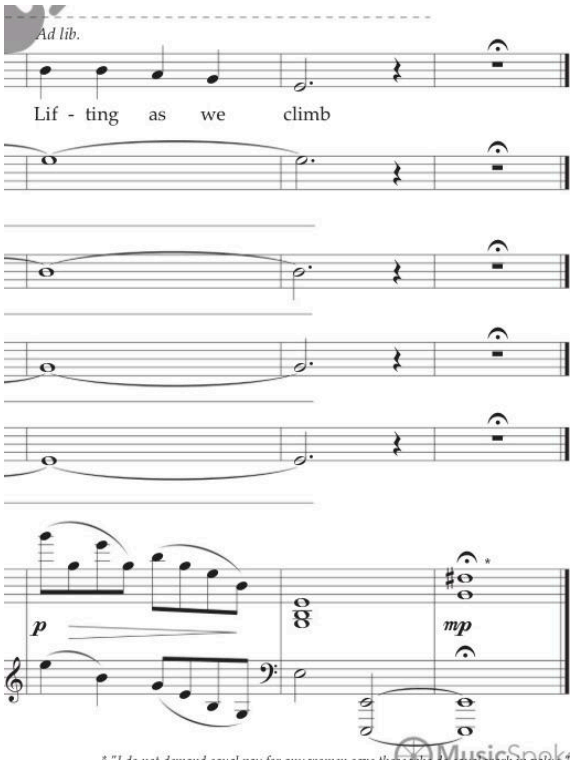
> In the latter half of the twentieth century one can detect a linkage between women's choral organizations and the women's movement that emerged from the activism for universal suffrage and proceeded toward the twenty-first century by way of various feminist movements (Hannam, 2014). Many women's choirs have embraced the opportunity to build strong and alternative choral practices, pioneering empowering, sensitive, community-based, and activist modes of musical collaboration.[53]

Historically, society regarded women composers as lesser than their male counterparts. Audiences valued their skills as performers but dismissed their identity as creators of the notes on the page. Audiences now admire Andrea Ramsey and countless other female composers for their compositional genius. Scholars and musicians continue to unveil music from the women's suffrage movement, and music inspired by such events continues to premiere, namely works like the Broadway musical *Suffs* (2022)*,* Lori Laitman's choral-orchestral work, *Are Women People?* (2019), and Stacy Garrop's "The Battle for the Ballot" (2020- composed for the suffrage centennial).

In Ramsey's *Suffrage Cantata*, the final chord in the fifth movement, played by the piano, lacks resolution, landing on the tonic with a seventh leading tone.

---

[52] André de Quadros, "Claiming Voice, Ending Silence: Women in Choral Leadership," in *Focus: Choral Music in Global Perspective*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019), 274, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429024627-10.
[53] De Quadros, "Claiming Voice, Ending Silence," 260.



Example 11. Andrea Ramsey, "Forward Into Light," *Suffrage Cantata.* mm. 141-143.[54]

Ramsey avoids a tidy conclusion, instead urging the audience to consider how they, too, can lead the march for continued liberty and justice for all. Despite a century of progress in women's rights since the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, women still struggle to claim their place in many fields, including music and composition. Educators, conductors, and singers must continue to program the music of women, recognizing their contributions to the canon. The work does not stop. It must continue. We shall continue "lifting as we climb."

[54] Ramsey, *Suffrage Cantata*, 87.

Bibliography

Brandes, Roslyn Leigh. "'Let Us Sing as We Go': The Role of Music in the United States Suffrage Movement." ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, University of Maryland, 2016.

Cooper, John Michael. *Margaret Bonds: The Montgomery Variations and Du Bois "Credo."* [First edition]. Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Hoch, Matthew, and Linda Lister. "Choral Music Composed by Women: A Brief History." The Choral Journal 59, no. 10 (2019): 8–19. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26662748.

Kimber, Marian Wilson. "Not Without a Grievance: Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Suffrage Movement, and the Reception of Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel." College Music Symposium 64, no. 2 (2024): 30–52. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48797097.

Nelson, Trevor Rand. "The Dissident Dame Alternative Feminist Methodologies and the Music of Ethel Smyth." ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, Michigan State University, 2016.

Mathias, Sandra L. "Meet the Composer: Andrea Ramsey." *Kodály Envoy* 41, no. 4 (2015): 6–7.

MusicSpoke. "Suffrage Cantata | Andrea Ramsey | MusicSpoke." YouTube video, 48:49. Posted August 16, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwNKXVrFy3k.

Quadros, André de. "Claiming Voice, Ending Silence: Women in Choral Leadership." In *Focus: Choral Music in Global Perspective*, 1st ed., 181–97. Routledge, 2019. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429024627-10.

Ramsey, Andrea. "Composer Andrea Ramsey on Her Inspiration for the Suffrage Cantata." YouTube video, 3:07. Posted May 14, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2SluS_399U.

Ramsey, Andrea. *Suffrage Cantata*. Hal Leonard, 2020.

Smyth, Ethel. *The March of the Women*. Chappell & Co., 1911.

The Vote. Part 1. *American Experience*. Season 32, Episode 9. Directed by Michelle Ferrari. Aired July 6, 2020, on PBS. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/vote/.

Wiley, Christopher. "Music and Literature: Ethel Smyth, Virginia Woolf, and 'The First Woman to Write an Opera.'" *The Musical Quarterly*. 2013;96(2):263-295. doi:10.1093/musqtl/gdt012.

Wood, Elizabeth. "Women, Music, and Ethel Smyth: A Pathway in the Politics of Music." The Massachusetts Review 24, no. 1 (1983): 125–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25089403.