

The March of the Women

This article is about the women's suffrage song. For the event in the French Revolution, see [The Women's March on Versailles](#).

"**The March of the Women**" is a song composed by [Ethel Smyth](#) in 1910, to words by [Cicely Hamilton](#). It became the official anthem of the [Women's Social and Political Union](#) (WSPU) and more widely the anthem of the [women's suffrage](#) movement throughout the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Activists sang it not only at rallies but also in prison while they were on [hunger strike](#). Smyth produced a number of different arrangements of the work.

□ Composition

Ethel Smyth composed the song in 1910, as a [unison](#) song with optional [piano](#) accompaniment, with words by Cicely Hamilton.^[1] Smyth based the melody on a traditional tune she had heard in [Abruzzo, Italy](#).^[2] She dedicated the song to the WSPU.^[1] In January 1911, the WSPU's newspaper, *Votes for Women*, described the song as "at once a hymn and a call to battle".^[3]

Performances

"The March of the Women" was first performed on 21 January 1911, by the Suffrage Choir, at a ceremony held on [Pall Mall, London](#),^[4] to celebrate a release of activists from prison. [Emmeline Pankhurst](#) introduced the song as the WSPU's official anthem, replacing "[The Women's Marseillaise](#)".^[4] The latter song was a setting of words by WSPU activist Florence Macaulay to the tune of [La Marseillaise](#).^[5]

On 23 March 1911 the song was performed at a rally in the [Royal Albert Hall](#). Smyth was ceremonially presented with a [baton](#) by Emmeline Pankhurst, and proceeded to conduct the whole gathering in singing it. Smyth was active in promoting the performance of the song throughout the WSPU's membership.^[6] It became the anthem of the women's suffrage movement throughout the United Kingdom.^[7]

A famous rendering of it took place in 1912, at [Holloway Prison](#), after many women activists were imprisoned as a result of a window-smashing campaign. Smyth's part in this had been to break the window of [Lewis Harcourt](#), the [Secretary of State for the Colonies](#).^[8] The conductor [Thomas Beecham](#) visited Smyth in prison and reported that he found the activists in the courtyard "...marching round it and singing lustily their war-chant while the composer, beaming approbation from an overlooking upper window, beat time in almost Bacchic frenzy with a toothbrush."^[3]

While imprisoned in April 1913, Emmeline Pankhurst undertook a [hunger strike](#) which she did not expect to survive. She told Smyth that at night she would feebly sing "The March of the Women" and another of Smyth's compositions, "Laggard Dawn".^[9]

Arrangements

Emmeline Pankhurst's statue, now the [Pankhurst Memorial](#), unveiled in 1930 as Smyth conducted "The March of the Women"

Smyth arranged the work several times. A version for [choir](#) and optional [orchestra](#) was included in *Songs of Sunrise*, a collection of three songs premiered on 1 April 1911 at the [Queen's Hall](#), London. The other two songs in the collection were "Laggard Dawn" and "1910". An arrangement of "The March of the Women" for solo piano appeared in 1914 in *King Albert's Book*, a fund-raising publication for [Belgian relief](#). On 6 March 1930, Smyth conducted a version of the march for [military band](#), on the occasion of the unveiling of a [statue to memorialize](#) Emmeline Pankhurst in [Victoria Tower Gardens](#).^[11] The ceremony was presided over by [Stanley Baldwin](#), and the performance was by the band of the [Metropolitan Police](#).^[10]

The tune of "The March of the Women" also appears in the [overture](#) of Smyth's [opera *The Boatswain's Mate*](#).^[11]

["The March of the Women" lyrics](#)

Words to The March of the Women

The March of the Women

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcTgkCg7trY>

Dame Ethel Smyth wrote the March of the Women (1911) for the Women's Social and Political Union, the leading organization of the suffragists in Britain. It was used as the theme for the BBC's "Shoulder to Shoulder," which isn't available on DVD and has not been rebroadcast for decades here. The graphics are in the public domain, and the performance is that of the Rainbow Chorus from May 2009, posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZItUc9...>

Cicely Hamilton wrote the lyrics to this exciting song. Ethel Smyth copyrighted Hamilton's four verses along with Smyth's own rousing music in 1911.

This was a popular song of the [suffrage movement](#).

Under the title of the song is the subtitle,
"Dedicated to the Women's Social and Political Union."

Verse 1

Shout, shout, up with your song!
Cry with the wind, for the dawn is breaking;
March, march, swing you along,
Wide blows our banner, and hope is waking.
Song with its story, dreams with their glory
Lo! they call, and glad is their word!
Loud and louder it swells,
Thunder of freedom, the voice of the Lord!

Verse 2

Long, long—we in the past
Cowered in dread from the light of heaven,
Strong, strong—stand we at last,
Fearless in faith and with sight new given.
Strength with its beauty, Life with its duty,
(Hear the voice, oh hear and obey!)
These, these—beckon us on!
Open your eyes to the blaze of day.

Verse 3

Comrades—ye who have dared
First in the battle to strive and sorrow!
Scorned, spurned—nought have ye cared,
Raising your eyes to a wider morrow,
Ways that are weary, days that are dreary,
Toil and pain by faith ye have borne;
Hail, hail—victors ye stand,
Wearing the wreath that the brave have worn!

Verse 4

Life, strife—those two are one,
Naught can ye win but by faith and daring.
On, on—that ye have done
But for the work of today preparing.
Firm in reliance, laugh a defiance,
(Laugh in hope, for sure is the end)
March, march—many as one,
Shoulder to shoulder and friend to friend.