

HULL FOLK WHO MADE THEIR MARK**ETHEL LEGINSKA, MUSICIAN**

Photo courtesy of Wikipedia

If you were born plain Ethel Liggins in Hull in 1886, and your parents were certainly not wealthy, not many people would have put money on you growing up to become an international concert pianist and conductor. But Ethel's talent as a musician was evident from a very early age and she first played piano in public at St George's Hall in Storey St (where the Wilberforce Health Centre now stands) whilst still aged only eight. She was fortunate to gain the patronage of Mary Wilson, wife of Arthur Wilson of the famous Wilson shipping line and she is said to have played for the future King Edward VII when he stayed with the Wilsons at their Tranby Croft home. It was at the instigation of another of that circle – Lady Maud Warrender - that Ethel later changed her stage name to Leginska. The thinking was that all the leading performers of the time had Polish or Russian sounding names and 'Leginska' fitted the bill rather better than 'Liggins!' With the Wilsons' support she went on to attend the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt and then went on to further study in Vienna before successfully touring Europe and then America as a pianist, where she acquired the nickname 'the Paderewski of women pianists.'

Described as a 'forgotten genius' Ethel was not only prodigiously talented but also a trailblazer for the role of women in music. She wrote anything from nursery rhymes to opera, founded a number of women's orchestras and became a renowned conductor at a time when women conductors were almost unheard of. She conducted a number of Europe's most prestigious orchestras and in 1925 made her conducting debut in America with the New York Philharmonic orchestra at Carnegie Hall. In 1935 she became the first woman to conduct her own opera in a major opera house. In the 1930s she lived in both London and Paris but with war looming moved to Los Angeles in 1939 where she worked largely as a piano teacher. She continued in this role until she died in 1970.

In 1907 Ethel had married the American musician Emerson Whithorn whom she had met whilst studying in Vienna and they occasionally performed together. For a while he served as her concert manager. They had one son – Cedric – but not long after he was born, and at a time when she had a particularly demanding schedule, Ethel vanished for several days.

This was the first of three nervous breakdowns she is thought to have suffered during her career. Her marriage deteriorated and the couple divorced in 1916, with Ethel losing the fight for custody of Cedric. Sadly she had very little contact with him thereafter. She spoke publicly about the difficulties professional women faced, particularly those who had children, and was particularly vocal about inadequate opportunities for women. She must have raised more than a few eyebrows when she stated that self-sacrifice for family's sake is *'over-rated'* and that *'it is impossible for a woman with a career to be unselfish'*. Perhaps those eyebrows were raised even higher when she added *'Why are we always being generalised about? And why, why are we so docile and obedient in abiding by our traditions? If only we women would sometimes rebel, ...break loose from traditions and go our own way! ...We will never be original, do great work, until we get some courage and daring and trust our own way instead of the eternal beaten paths on which we are always asked to poke along.'*

How sad that this extraordinarily talented musician and feminist with the troubled private life should now be largely forgotten.

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27/5/2024