

A Study of W. W. Cobbett: Observations of Being an Amateur

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Walter Willson Cobbett (1847-1937) is known as an amateur musician and patron of chamber music in early twentieth century Britain. He is regarded mainly as a contributor to the professional music world from the viewpoint of composers and scholars, for the establishment of a prize competition of chamber music in short form, *Phantasy*, as a modern analogue of the Elizabethan fancy for viols, and the production of his *Cyclopaedia of Chamber Music*.

However, writings of Cobbett and his contemporaries on his musical activities depict him in a different light, revealing that he is an amateur and devotee to the musical community making efforts towards popularizing chamber music. He was proud of being an amateur and sought the interests of both amateurs and professional musicians.

In the flourishing music scenes in Britain at that time, in general, amateurs and professional musicians were on good terms and mingled with other individuals and organizations, but sometimes there were tensions. Cobbett never exclusively belonged to just one single organization. Instead, he was involved in many musical organizations from a traditional male only society to a modern learned society, a women musician's society, and some music schools.

He advocated *Phantasy* with two goals in mind, first, for the general public to take an interest in chamber music, and secondly, for a new form of English chamber music to be created. While he achieved his second goal of creating a new form in English chamber music to some extent, his first goal of popularizing it became less visible. However, Cobbett never abandoned it and kept claiming it, while he respected the experts' comments on the *Phantasy* form. As a result, *Phantasy* became a site where Cobbett and professional musicians productively exchanged their ideas, through which popularization of chamber music was recognized.

Cobbett and the Society of Women Musicians established the Cobbett Free Library in order to promote chamber music with an emphasis on interests of amateurs and music lovers. The Society also received his donation to improve quartet performances. Within a professional male dominated music world, which tended to see women musicians as immature amateurs, the Society aimed to enhance both their musical ability and their position through friendly cooperation without distinction between amateurs and professionals. Some of the women were leading musicians, and they welcomed male associates. The cooperation between Cobbett and the Society could be regarded as a challenge to a professional, male-dominated music world. It could be said to benefit the music

world itself, for it widened its viewpoint.

Cobbett's Cyclopaedia is both an international work of musical experts and a representation of an amateur's viewpoints. It also reflects some consequences of professional musicians' increasing commitment to music for general public not just for musicians.

In managing projects such as competitions and editing, Cobbett worked closely with both amateurs and professionals, with modest leadership. Sometimes he was like a professional musician and critic, for he had gained a wealth of knowledge on music largely from them. At other times, he was like a layman, for he felt sympathy for their reaction to music and he was openly positive about their frank attitude that, to him, indicated sensitivity to music. In any case, he always considered himself an amateur, which to him meant "one who loves music." In that sense, whether female or male, amateur or professional musician, or a commoner, everyone could become an "amateur." The ideal music world to him, which he tried to realize as he went around the musical community and made the relationships with people and organizations, consisted of those "amateurs." His contemporaries saw his activities as contributions, not just to the professional music world, but to the musical community in general.