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SCHUBERT
STRING QUINTET IN C, D956
THE COBBETT STRING QUARTET
WITH CHARLES CRABBE

W. W. COBBETT, EMILY KEADY (VIOLINS)
SUSAN SPAIN DUNK (VIOLA)
MARIE DARE, CHARLES CRABBE (CELLOS)

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | 1st mvt. - Allegro ma non troppo | 12:15 |
| 2 | 2nd mvt. - Adagio | 11:19 |
| 3 | 3rd mvt. - Scherzo (Presto) | 8:19 |
| 4 | 4th mvt. - Allegretto | 9:35 |

Recorded acoustically on Wednesday 15th and Thursday 16th July, 1925
Issued in early 1926 as NGS discs GG to MM
Transfer made in 2006, XR Restoration in 2009 by Andrew Rose at Pristine Audio
Total duration: 41:28 ©2009 Pristine Audio.

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The first thing to remember when considering this world-premiere recording is that it was led (as well as paid for) by a man who had just celebrated his 78th birthday (born 11 July 1847) and was not then, nor had ever been, a professional violinist. Yes, it has many fallible moments: as the piece progresses, Cobbett sounds more and more tired, as well he might! Not counting any (undocumented) run-throughs for technical tests, for the twelve sides issued, twenty-four takes are known to have been recorded over two days - and there were probably more.

It was an ambitious, pioneering undertaking: when this was recorded, as far as we know, only one complete Schubert quartet (not counting the *Quartettsatz*) had ever been recorded, D.810 in d, as had the *Trout* Quintet (only once each). At 12 sides, it shared, with HMV's set of the Franck Quartet, issued in August 1925, the distinction of being the largest chamber music set issued up to that time.

What we are offered here is a precious window into the forgotten (in fact, never very well-known) world of private chamber music making among the English ruling classes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among all the misconceived and oft-repeated pronouncements about England as *Das Land ohne Musik* is one which has been especially hard to refute: that there was no chamber music tradition in England. But, as the historian of British chamber music Christina Bashford is finding, not only was there a thriving and innovative public chamber music scene, gentlemen played chamber music in country houses, vicarages and rectories, colleges and schools, barracks and taverns.

One of them was Walter Willson Cobbett, who made his fortune in the machine-belt business but was a life-long lover of chamber music and, in old age, its promoter, practitioner and patron (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Willson_Cobbett). He fell in love with it when he heard Joachim, no less, lead a Beethoven string quartet at London's famous 'Pops' in London's St. James's Hall (probably in the late 1860s). Cobbett loved playing and he played. In his famous *Cyclopedia*, he wrote: *'I myself during the last sixty years have been able to devote on an average about two hours daily to the playing of concerted music, to practising the violin or viola parts in advance, to studying scores and, as far as possible keeping up my technique.'* (He also wrote, *'I am not exceptionally robust, but the considerable strain involved in three hours' strenuous playing of quartets and sonatas not only leaves me unfatigued, but with a greater sense of buoyancy when the last note is heard than when the first note was sounded.'* But we can forgive him the signs of strain evident in the Schubert Quintet.)

The performance itself hardly sounds amateurish, apart from the leader's occasional lapses and some ragged ensemble: it is projected, dramatic and felt. The style is mixed: Cobbett uses less vibrato than his colleagues, as might be expected: I don't know all their ages but he was surely by some margin the oldest and has a basically 19th Century playing style. The others were all, I believe, professionals: Emily Keady (violin), Susan Spain Dunk (viola) and Marie Dare (cello I), with Charles Crabbe (cello II). Most if not all of them played at the South Place Concerts in Finsbury and so this set also offers us a glimpse of the playing heard by that famous audience of chamber-music lovers, less well-off than those who could afford to go to concerts in the West End but no less dedicated and knowledgeable, as well as of the music they loved: South Place's most prolific quartet leader violinist was John Saunders, on whose tombstone, as Cobbett mentions in the Gramophone article which accompanied this release in February 1926 (see the *Pristine Classical* website), was engraved a melody from the Schubert Quintet.

NOTES BY NICK MORGAN - FULL NOTES ON THIS RECORDING CAN BE FOUND AT WWW.PRISTINECLASSICAL.COM