

WW Cobbett's Support for Women Composers

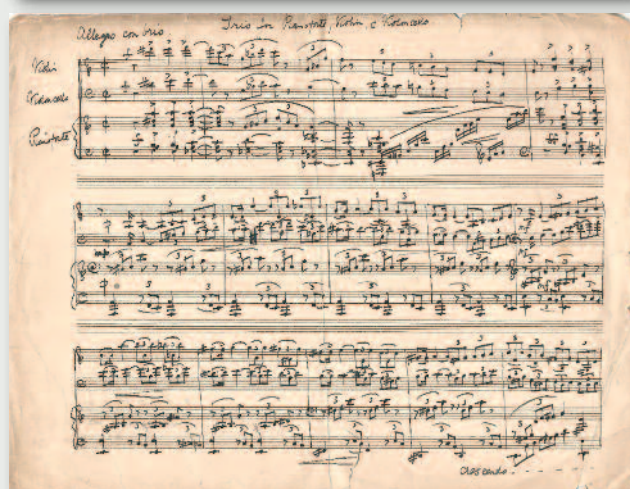
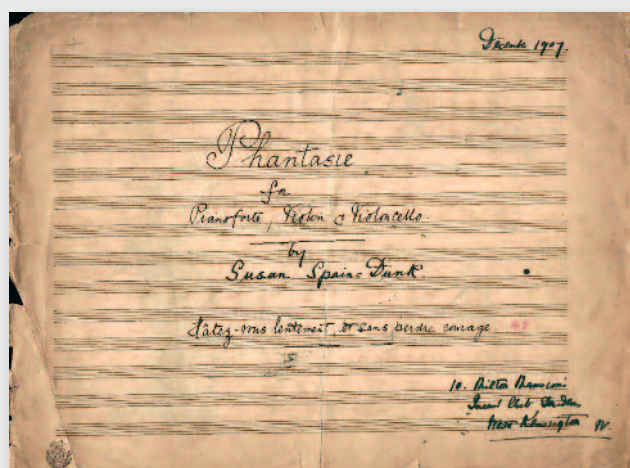


Fig 1 and Fig 2 Surviving cover page and first page of Susan Spain-Dunk's *Phantasie Piano Trio in A minor*

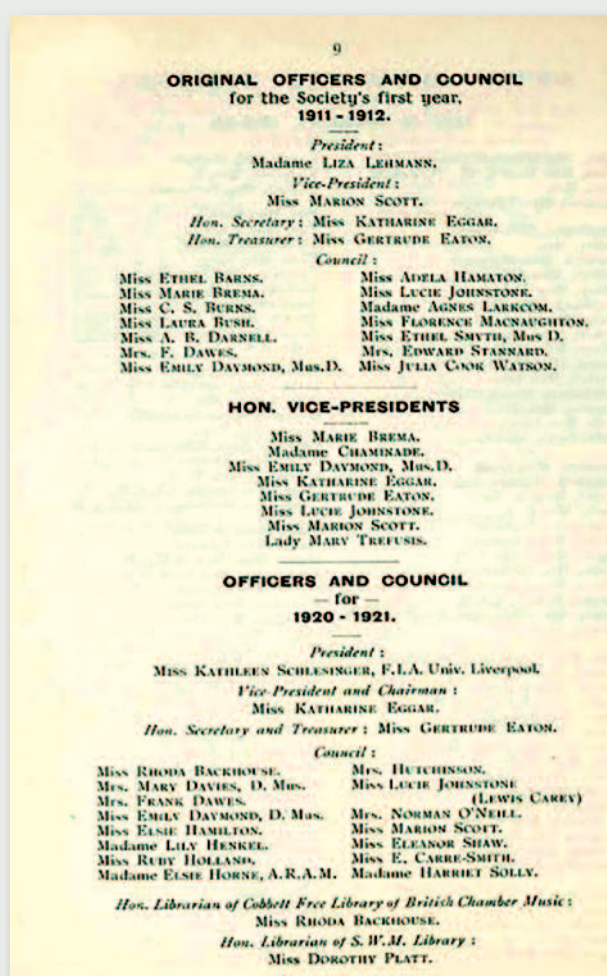


Fig 7 Officers and Council in 1920 Annual Report, with Miss Rhoda Backhouse, first librarian of Cobbett Free Library of British Chamber Music

[The Walter Willson Cobbett Medal for services to chamber music was inaugurated in 1924 and endowed by Walter Willson Cobbett (Master 1928-29). The award is presented annually to a distinguished musician, selected by the Court, for service to chamber music – Editor]

In her 2013 book, *British Woman Composers and Instrumental Chamber Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, Laura Seddon states that 'women composers responded positively to the notion of a phantasy; notably, it freed them from an almost exclusively male tradition' (p. 124). From 1908 to 1920, Susan Spain-Dunk (1880-1962), Alice Verne-Bredt (1864-1958), Ethel Barns (1873-1948), Maud Emily Marshall (1868-1951), and Dorothy Howell (1898-1982) would all write Phantasies, prompted to do so by Walter Willson Cobbett's competitions and commissions.

This story begins with the second competition in 1908. The Worshipful Company of Musicians requested the composition of a 'short Phantasie in the form of a string trio for violin, violoncello and pianoforte.' The numbered prizes went to Frank Bridge (1st prize), James Friskin (2nd prize), and John Ireland (3rd prize). However, additional prizes were awarded to Susan Spain-Dunk and Alice Verne-Bredt. Verne-Bredt's *Phantasie Trio* would be

published by Schott and demonstrates a unique and brilliantly conceived response to the stipulations of the Phantasy genre. The review that Verne-Bredt received for this composition from Marion Scott and Katherine Eggar in the Chamber Music supplement to *The Music Student* is complimentary. They write:

There is great freedom of rhythm already evinced by the first subject being cast in 5/4 time. This is a form of emancipation, which always seems a little artificial in composers of Western Europe, but in the present case it is interesting as showing a widening of the imagination.

Verne-Bredt would go on to write a *Phantasie Piano Quartet* and a *Phantasie Piano Quintet*, but both are undated and remain unpublished.

Unfortunately, only the cover and page one of Spain-Dunk's *Phantasie Trio in A minor*, have come to light. **Fig 1 and 2.** However, from the small sample available, it is clear that Spain-Dunk was comfortable using a complex harmonic language and virtuoso string writing. Indeed, the triplet figuration would later go on to form the rhythmic backbone of the *Phantasy String Quartet* of 1915. It is no surprise that Spain-Dunk was comfortable writing so fluidly for string instruments given her proficiency as a

violinist and violist. Reviews of her playing from 1904 state that she 'showed a thorough mastery of the violin' and 'produces a remarkably fine tone, has great freedom of the bow and her technique is in every way admirable.'

Spain-Dunk would write a further two works in the Phantasy genre. Her *Violin Sonata in B minor* was awarded a prize of £5 5s at the third competition of 1910. The Romance from this sonata was published by J B Cramer and demonstrates the warmth and lyricism that Spain-Dunk could conjure from the violin. The rest of the sonata is unpublished, and the location of the manuscript unknown.

The only Phantasy work by Spain-Dunk which is available at present in its entirety is the *Phantasy*

ASSOCIATES, 1912.	
Archer, Mr. Edgar	M MacDonald, Mr. Somerled
Bedford, Mr. Herbert	Montagu-Nathan, Mr. M.
Borsdorf, Mr. Oskar	Newton, Mr. Ernest
Clarke, Mr. Reginald	Peyton, Mr. Hugh
Cobbett, Mr. W. W.	Phillips, Mr. Charles
Deacon, Mr. Charles	Sawyer, Mr. H.
Dunhill, Mr. Thomas, Mus.D.	Scott, Mr. Sydney
Dyke, Mr. Spencer	Shinnis, Mr. Sidney
Gurney, Mr. Ivor	Stephenson, Mr. Morton
Hunter, Mr. Riddell	Visetti, Mr. Albert
Lee, Mr. Falkner	

Fig 4 List of Associates of the Society for Women Musicians, List of Members 1912

String Quartet in D minor. Composed in 1915, it is unclear whether the composition was written for the fourth Cobbett competition or not. The fourth competition did have the stipulation for the composition of a string quartet where the two violin parts are of equal interest and importance. This is certainly the case with Spain-Dunk's *Phantasy Quartet* as the multiple thematic lines are passed between the quartet and the second violinist taking on a prominent role. **Fig 3**

In 1910-11, Cobbett commissioned 12 phantasies 'for every combination found in the average chamber music programme'. One of the composers commissioned was Ethel Barns, who responded with a *Phantasy for Two Violins and Piano*, Op.26. Barns had established herself as a leading violinist and composer in London since her debut at the Crystal Palace in 1896. Known for composing a number of short works for violin and several violin sonatas, it is unsurprising that Cobbett commissioned her for this work. In a review of the work for the *Cyclopaedic Survey of Chamber Music*, Katharine Eggar writes:

The violin parts are the work of a skilled player who knows the legitimate capacities of the instrument and conceives passages which lie well for fingers and bow. The piano, too, is in sympathy with its more brilliant qualities, the chief resource being resonant chords and wide-ranging arpeggios... the writing for the two violins shows constructive care, and the two parts are of equal interest.

Ethel Barns was a member of the first council of the Society of Women Musicians, founded in 1911. Cobbett was an associate of the Society from 1912, and in 1918 established, at his own expense, a Free Library of Chamber Music in conjunction with the Society. According to Cobbett, it contained every

chamber work of importance published by British composers. Cobbett would go on to found the Chamber Music Section of this society in 1920 and a challenge medal for quartet playing which was competed for

annually. He praises the work of the Society in his *Cyclopaedic Survey of Chamber Music*, stating: *It is doubtful if in any part of the world there existed a body of ladies which accomplishes more in the promotion of interests of good music with so little assumption of importance than the Society of Women Musicians... It is one of the phenomena of London life to which I am glad to draw attention.*

Fig 4, 5, 6 and 7

Very little is known about the *Phantasy Trio* (Dance Phantasy) composed by Maud Emily Marshall in 1919. The only reference to the work is in the *Cyclopaedic Survey of Chamber Music*, stating that it was awarded



Fig 3 The Cobbett Ensemble featuring Susan Spain-Dunk (far left) and Walter Wilson Cobbett (centre, seated), late 1910s or early 1920s

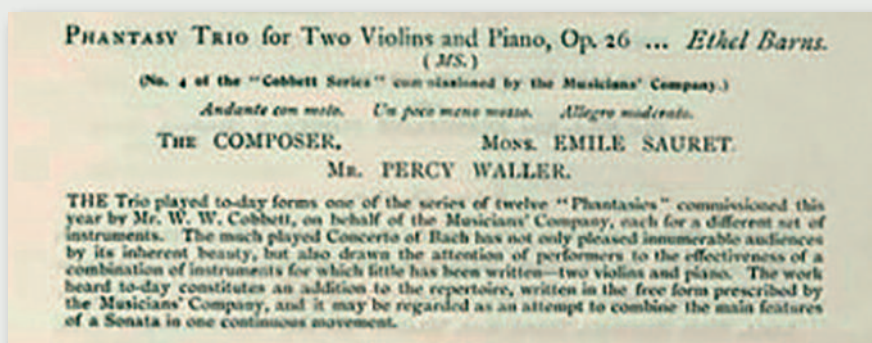


Fig 5 Performance of Ethel Barns' *Phantasy Trio for Two Violins and Piano*

a supplementary Cobbett prize in 1920. Thus, the work was evidently entered into the 7th competition for the composition of a Dance Phantasy.

Thankfully, Dorothy Howells' *Phantasy for Violin and Piano* has survived in full. It was the result of a commission by Cobbett of students at the Royal Academy of Music in 1920 (the other student commissioned to write a phantasy for violin and piano was Alan Bush) and was later published by Augener Ltd in 1925. The work is brazenly romantic, with critics describing it as *delightfully flowery and melodious*.

Following the transfer of the Cobbett Competition to the administration of the Royal College of Music in 1920 to support the study of chamber music, the following female composers were awarded prizes:

- Imogen Holst: *Phantasy for String Quartet* (1928)
- Grace Williams: *Phantasy Quintet for Piano and Strings* (1928)
- Helen Perkin: *Phantasy Quartet* (1930)
- Elizabeth Maconchy: *Phantasy Quintet* (1930)
- Helen Hunter: *Phantasy Trio for Strings* (1931)
- Lillian Harris: *Phantasy Trio* (1932)
- Mary Couper: *Phantasy Quintet* (1934)
- Miriam Hyde: *Fantasy Quartet* (1934)

■ Joan Trimble: *Phantasy Trio* (1940)

■ Ruth Gipps: 'Sabrina' *String Quartet* (1940) and 'Brocade' *Piano Quartet* (1941)

During the interwar period, Phantasies were also composed by Marie Dare (*Phantasy Quartet*, 1933, *Phantasy Quintet*, 1934), Dorothy Gow (*Fantasy String Quartet*), and Minna Keal (*Fantasy*, 1929).

To return to Seddon, clearly women composers did respond positively to the notion of a Phantasy. Cobbett's competitions allowed several female composers to explore their compositional voice and to produce fantastic works of chamber music. For many of them, the opportunities that Cobbett offered acted as a stepping stone at the beginning of highly successful compositional careers. It is unfortunate that so much of the music written by these composers remains unpublished or has gone missing. If anyone knows of the whereabouts of any of the pieces listed above, please do let the author know, at mdm517@student.bham.ac.uk, and hopefully we will be able to hear some of this remarkable music once again.

MATTHEW MADELEY

[Matthew Madeley is a guest contributor and a PhD student at the University of Birmingham. Editor]

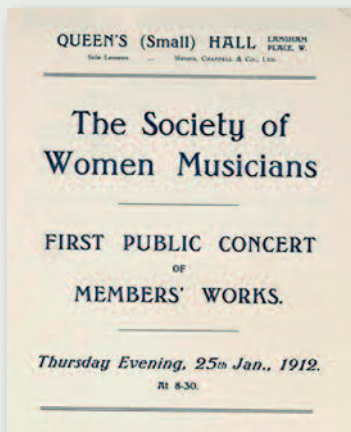


Fig 6