

Performing Power: Female Musicianship and Embodied Artistry in Bertha Thomas's *The Violin-Player*

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<1>In an early moment in Bertha Thomas's *The Violin-Player* (1880), a young violinist named Laurence Therval performs for a public audience. She plays with passion and vigor, intently focused on her music: "At such moments the outside world was almost non-existent for the little musician. Laurence had early acquired the power of thus throwing all the nerve-force in her – so to speak – into one channel as she played" (l.199).

<2>At first, Thomas's depiction of a musical woman may seem rather unremarkable. After all, Victorian fiction is replete with women who play or listen to music; readers might think of Wilkie Collins's Laura Fairlie, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley, Charles Dickens's Florence Dombey or Rosa Bud, or George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver, Gwendolen Harleth, or Alcharisi. Music-literature scholars such as Delia da Sousa Correa, Alisa Clapp-Itnyre, and Phyllis Weliver have identified the pervasiveness of musical women in Victorian fiction.⁽¹⁾ As they and others argue, scenes of music listening or performance often heighten narrative drama, provide the context for courtship scenes, or reveal the educational or class status of the heroine.⁽²⁾

<3>Thomas's portrayal of Laurence, however, radically departs from many other representations of female musicianship in Victorian fiction. Mary Burgan argues that nineteenth-century novels often feature the "heroine at the piano" – the amateur performer who sings or plays piano only in domestic settings for family members or potential suitors.⁽³⁾ The counterpart to the "heroine" figure, Weliver suggests, is often the "siren" or "demon," such as Lady Audley, whose "performance or response to music proves seductive to male characters" (Weliver, *Women* 6). Some women, Weliver argues, disrupt the "heroine"/"siren" binary by resembling both; the titular protagonist of George Du Maurier's *Trilby* appears as both "angel and siren" (Weliver, *Women* 18). As Paula Gillett has pointed out, there are fictional women musicians, such as those in Jessie Fothergill's *The First Violin* (1877) and Mary Augusta Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), who depart from these "heroine"/"siren" formulations by trading the drawing room for the stage and embarking on musical careers. However, in most cases, their pursuits are cut short when they marry; the novels "accep[t] marriage as the desirable conclusion of a musical career" (Gillett 13). The performing women in Eliot, arguably the most musical Victorian author, range from the dilettante unable to transcend her amateur

status (Gwendolen Harleth), to the passionate listener (Maggie Tulliver), to the opera diva (Alcharisi and Armgart).(4) Though Eliot grants Alcharisi and Armgart musical careers, both women ultimately fall victim to what Rosemarie Bodenheimer calls the “loss of voice plot,” as they are struck by illnesses that render them unable to sing (22). As da Sousa Correa and Kathleen Blake have argued, while Eliot admired the amateurish but ethically-inflected music associated with Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* or Mirah Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda*, she was suspicious of professional-level female musicianship (such as Armgart’s or Alcharisi’s) as something that hampers human fellowship and sympathy, particularly among women (da Sousa Correa, *George Eliot* 154; Blake 80).

<4>*The Violin-Player*, however, offers a counter-narrative to these portrayals of female musicians in Victorian fiction. Thomas’s heroine escapes the fates of her fictional counterparts; she transcends many of the limitations placed on nineteenth-century female musicians by gaining access to an all-male studio, pursuing professional training on the Continent, and ultimately enjoying a sustained career uninhibited by the trappings of marriage or domesticity or charges of either amateurism or licentiousness. In the scene above, for instance, Laurence appears neither dilettantish, nor docile, nor diva-like; she performs with immense “power” and “force” and is more concerned with the music itself than with the adulation of the audience.

<5>Most importantly, Laurence’s playing represents a fundamentally embodied act – one that derives from her “nerve-force.” In the nineteenth century, physicists and physiologists developed new theories about the material and corporeal nature of music and sound. Physicists such as Hermann von Helmholtz and John Tyndall, as well as thinkers in the burgeoning field of physiological aesthetics, such as Grant Allen, began to conceive of sound as a physical force that traveled in particle-filled waves, incited vibrations in physical objects and human bodies, and precipitated corporeal convulsions.(5) Just as proponents of physiological aesthetics began to argue that artistic reception was, as Benjamin Morgan writes, “routed through the bodily substrate of consciousness,” sound theorists described the human interest in and capacity for playing music as physiological traits (Morgan 89). To them, musicality was as at once biologically determined and physically gratifying.

<6>In the passage above, then, the reference to Laurence’s “nerve-force” can be read not simply as a metaphor for her musicality, but rather as an evocation of the literal, physical power of her music. The phrase “nerve-force” recalls Helmholtz and Tyndall’s ideas about the role of the nerves in music listening and production – particularly their ability to perceive and transmit musical sensations to the brain. Helmholtz, for instance, emphasized music’s ability to arouse “specific nervous energies” in players and listeners – to cause “twitching,” “agitations,” “irritation,” and “twitterings” of the nerves and muscles of the human body (148). The emphasis on Laurence’s intent focus and sonic power – features that are rooted in her body at the very level of her nerves – casts her not just as a successful or skilled violinist, but as one whose musicianship is inextricable from her physical life.

<7>Building on recent studies of women musicians in Victorian literature by Weliver, Clapp-Itnyre, and others, this article argues that Thomas offers an alternative to literary conceptions of female performers as docile amateurs, self-important divas, domesticated performers, or failed professionals. By drawing on contemporary understandings of music's ties to physiology, Thomas imagines a performer whose musicality is so tied to her physical life that it cannot be relinquished, denied, suppressed, or ignored; Laurence *must* play, and others must listen. Laurence's embodied musicality grants her experiences of energy, vitality, and pleasure as well as the power to corporeally affect her listeners. While the performing body poses a problem for characters like Lady Audley, whose piano playing, Weliver writes, signals her "siren" status, or Alcharisi and Armgart, whose musical bodies ultimately fail them, in *The Violin-Player*, Thomas mobilizes the links between music and corporeality to advance her portrayal of Laurence as a capable, passionate, and powerful musician. Laurence not only doggedly pursues a professional career, but also experiences music as innate, embodied, and essential to her physical well-being. Laurence's musicality is natural – and thus to some extent unassailable. By associating female musicality with the realm of the physiological and the organic, Thomas levels a critique against Victorian thinkers (discussed below) who described women's musicianship as unnatural, unacceptable, or impossible. Musicality, Thomas's novel suggests, exists apart from social codes, such as those based on gender, and is instead rooted in the brain, muscles, and nerves of the human body.

<8>This reading of *The Violin-Player* thus contributes to the dynamic field of music-literature studies not only by attending to a virtually unexamined text, but also by showing how the lens of nineteenth-century sound science illuminates questions of gender, performance, and embodiment in musical fiction. Several scholars have uncovered links between music and science in Victorian literature. Weliver explores questions of mental science and spiritualism in Du Maurier's *Trilby* and Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, both of which feature music as an agent of mesmeric control (*Women* 59-97; "Crowd Control" 57). She also uses theories of evolutionary biology, physiological associationism, and Darwinian sexual selection in her discussions of Eliot's use of music to show the relationship between characters and their communities (Weliver, *Women* 17). Clapp-Itnyre argues that Darwinian theories of music and sexual selection illuminate moments of physicality in dance scenes in Dickens and Hardy (*Angelic* 22-3, 167). John Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003) demonstrates the widespread Victorian interest in acoustical science, showing how the ideas of Helmholtz, Tyndall, and others reached authors such as Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy, who, he argues, were preoccupied by issues of urban noise, the human voice, and sound technology.

<9>Remaining underexplored, however, are the intersections between sound science and issues of gender and embodiment – intersections foregrounded in *The Violin-Player*. Thomas's novel demonstrates how Victorian acoustical theory and music physiology could be deployed to advance a radical portrayal of a female musician whose playing reflects not docile obedience to cultural scripts, nor dangerous deviations from moral codes, nor a fundamental lack of (masculine) strength or ability, but rather natural, physiological action and skill.

“Beyond her muscular power:” Women Musicians in Victorian England

<10>Musicologists have now firmly established that Victorian England was far from a “land without music,” as the German critic Oscar Adolf Hermann Schmitz famously wrote in 1914 (Solie 261). In the past three decades, events such as the publication of Nicholas Temperley’s *The Lost Chord* (1989) and the inaugural Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain Conference in 1997 have ignited scholarly interest in the vibrant musical life of Victorian England. Temperley, Christina Bashford, Leanne Langley, and others have discovered an unprecedented growth of concert halls, music conservatories, orchestras, chamber music groups, and opera companies during the Victorian period – an “English Musical Renaissance” in which music began to play an unprecedentedly large role in public life (Weliver, *Musical Crowd* 3). The period between 1850 and 1905, for instance, witnessed the emergence of the New Philharmonic Society, the Royal Italian Opera, and the London Symphony Orchestra, as well as the construction of Royal Albert Hall, Steinway Hall, and Queen’s Hall (Samson 650-70).

<11>As feminist musicologists such as Gillett and Sophie Fuller have pointed out, however, women were in many ways excluded from this emerging musical world. While works such as Derek Hyde’s *New-Found Voices: Women in Nineteenth-Century English Music* (1984) locate women’s significant contributions to Victorian musical life – from sponsoring and performing in chamber music concerts to composing songs, ballads, and chamber works – women rarely participated in nineteenth-century orchestral culture (Hyde 46-8). Despite the successes of famous female soloists like the opera singers Adelina Patti and Nellie Melba as well as rare instrumentalists like the British pianist Fanny Davies and the German violinist Wilma Norman-Neruda (Lady Hallé), women were most often excluded from the realm of professional instrumental performance.⁽⁶⁾ In a November 1906 article in *The Musical Times*, the author “F.G.E.” describes the rarity of a case like Neruda’s: “Violin playing by ladies made slow progress in England, even after the wonderful achievements of Wilhelmina Neruda (Lady Hallé) gave it such a splendid impetus” (F.G.E. 739). In March 1894, the violinist Ada Molteno – a member of two women’s orchestras, the Covent Garden and Princess’s Theatre Ladies’ Orchestras – wrote an editorial in *The Orchestral Association Gazette* in which she lamented that although women comprised a large portion of the classes at the Royal Academy of Music, the Royal College of Music, and the Guildhall School of Music, their skills would be of “little use” until they were admitted to professional orchestras (63). Molteno wrote, “I would merely ask whether it is just or desirable that a woman who has devoted a great part of her life to her art, should, simply because she is a woman, be denied the privilege of exercising it for the benefit of the public, and her own pleasure and profit” (64).

<12>These concerns persisted for decades. In 1911, a group of female musicians and composers including Katharine Emily Eggar, Marion Scott, and Gertrude Eaton founded the Society of Women Musicians (SWM), which advocated for women’s membership in symphony orchestras. Throughout the first half of twentieth century, members of the SWM wrote letters

and called meetings to urge ensembles such as the Royal Philharmonic and the National Orchestra of the B.B.C. to open to women. In a letter dated October 29, 1920, SWM member Gertrude Eaton wrote to the SWM's founder Katharine Emily Eggar, "It would be a great move if we could get that [the Royal Philharmonic] open to women" (Eaton). In October 1928, members of the SWM wrote to Sir John Reight, Director General of the B.B.C., urging him to admit women to the organization's new National Orchestra: "In view of the fact that this Orchestra is termed 'National,' and that it comprises one hundred instrumentalists, we feel that this omission is a very serious matter from the point of view of women orchestral players" (SWM). According to musicologist Lucy Green, however, it was not until World War Two left a void of male musicians that women were really able to "flood the major orchestras" in Britain (Green 67).⁽⁷⁾ London Symphony Orchestra historian Richard Morrison has written that the LSO remained an "enclave of lads" as late as the 1970s (187).

<13>Opponents of professional musicianship for women often used arguments about the female body to advance their cause. In an October 1880 article titled "Musical Doctors," published in *The Musical Times*, the musician and writer Henry C. Lunn worried about the "exhausting effect" of musical examinations on young girls, which will "shortly engage the attention of the medical profession" (496). In a February 1894 article in *The Orchestral Association Gazette*, Wallace Sutcliffe insisted that women lack the physical strength necessary for serious musicianship: "[H]eavy, arduous, mechanical labour, and all work entailing long, severe, mental strain, is constitutionally more adapted to man than woman...Lack of physical power has always and will always hamper women in any arduous work" (48-9). Sutcliffe asserted that women possess fewer arm muscles, which explains their limited "power of tone" on instruments such as the violin (48-9). Similarly, in his instructional work *The Secrets of Violin Playing*, the violin professor W.C. Honeyman attributed women's inability to play the violin to their lack of muscular strength:

When listening to a solo on the violin played by a woman, one of two criticisms is generally expressed, no matter how great the executive ability of the player: first, 'How sweet the music is, but how thin her tone;' or second, 'Her execution is good, but how harshly she plays.' In the first, the player is probably content to produce good music, as far as her muscular strength allows her; in the second, determined to get fullness of tone, she sacrifices the music, forces the tone beyond her muscular power, and gets only harsh noise. She cannot, as with the pianoforte, thump, but she can press and screech and bite out the notes, which is only another way of saying that she can force. (74)⁽⁸⁾

Honeyman continued by arguing that though women's fingers are thinner and suppler than those of men, their hands are smaller, thus rendering them unable to play wider intervals (such as fifths and octaves) and bigger chords that required more fingers (74). To many in the Victorian musical world, then, female musicality was not simply unacceptable, but inevitably inferior.

<14>It is unsurprising, then, that we see so few imaginations of successful female performers in nineteenth-century fiction. Thomas, however, was uniquely situated to offer one such imagination. She likely possessed an uncommonly optimistic perspective on Victorian women's musicianship, as both of her sisters were among the rare women who, like Patti or Neruda, enjoyed successful professional musical careers.⁽⁹⁾ Thomas's elder sister Florence Marshall was a composer, conductor, and pianist; she attended the Royal Academy of Music, contributed to the first edition of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, wrote a biography of Handel, and conducted concerts for ensembles such as the South Hampstead Orchestra (Burton). Thomas lived with Marshall for a time and in fact wrote the libretto for her sister's operetta "Princess Sprite," which premiered in 1892 at Royal Albert Hall with both Marshall and her daughter on violin (Gillett 254; "Music in Liverpool" 491).⁽¹⁰⁾

<15>Thomas's other sister Frances was a professional clarinetist – a career nearly unheard of for women during the Victorian period.⁽¹¹⁾ Frances studied with Henry Lazarus at the Royal Academy of Music, where she won several awards, including a commendation for harmony in July 1875, a silver medal for clarinet in July 1876, and a certificate of merit for clarinet in July 1877 ("Royal Academy of Music" 170-1; "Music" 114-115; "Royal Academy of Music: Female Department" 390). Though Lazarus thought women clarinetists "unbecoming," he nonetheless allowed Frances to play with him at concerts and recitals (Weston 257-8). After graduating from the Royal Academy, Frances performed widely throughout England, giving both orchestral and chamber concerts at prestigious venues such as St. James's Hall, Queen's Small Hall, Princes' Hall, and St. Martin's Hall and joining ensembles such as the English Ladies' Orchestra, Crystal Palace Ladies' Orchestra, and Dundee Ladies' Orchestra (*Musical Times* 1894 482; *Musical Times* 1896 266; "The Musical Artists' Society" 346; Weston 257-8). Frances also played in Florence's South Hampstead Orchestra on several occasions (*Musical Times* 1879 215; *Musical Times* 1890 350).

<16>The musical press responded favorably to Frances's performances. Though some, such as the *Musical Times* reviewer of her May 1893 performance at St. Martin's Hall, merely reported that she played in a "thoroughly competent manner," other listeners were more enthusiastic ("Musical Artists' Society" 346). In August 1878, *The Musical Times* wrote that Frances was "rapidly making her way as a clarinet-player" (*Musical Times* 1878 451). In July 1887, *The Musical World* reported on Frances's contribution to a concert by Mademoiselle Gabrielle Vaillant at Steinway Hall:

[E]ven more interest was perhaps excited by Schumann's 'Märchenerzählungen,' a trio for piano, clarinet, and viola, in which the clarinet part was played by Miss Frances Thomas. Lady flautists are not now unknown, but it is indeed rare to find a lady undertaking the difficulties, combined as they are with the unpicturesque attitude, of the wind instrument in question. That she was quite equal to the occasion must be cordially admitted, her tone and execution being alike worthy of all commendation. ("Miscellaneous Concerts" 559)

Frances was also involved in efforts to make professional music-making more accessible to women. On Monday, October 14, 1912, she performed in a concert for the SWM, playing SWM member Cecile Hartog's "Pieces for Clarinet and Pianoforte" with Hartog on the piano (SWM Programme).

<17>Though Frances and Florence were often restricted to women's or regional orchestras, they nonetheless enjoyed long-term musical careers and earned the respect and admiration of critics, composers, and audiences. Despite her society's condemnation of female musicality, then, Thomas lived alongside two women who disproved Honeyman's assertion that female musicality was "beyond [women's] muscular power." In her sisters, Thomas perhaps found real-life models for her heroine Laurence.

The Violin-Player

<18>Though almost never studied today, *The Violin-Player* was likely moderately popular in its time. By the time of the novel's release, Thomas had already garnered a minor literary reputation with her earlier works *Proud Maisie* (1877) and *Cressida* (1878). She was perhaps most well-known for her satirical pamphlet "Latest Intelligence from Planet Venus," a parodic work that promoted female suffrage and imagined a world in which only women had the right to vote or sit in the House of Commons – in which "all political business, electoral and parliamentary, is allotted to the women" ("Latest Intelligence" 3). *The Violin-Player* was serialized between January and November 1880 in *London Society*, a literary periodical that also published authors such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Walter Besant, Margaret Oliphant, Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins, and Eliza Lynn Linton. The London publisher Bentley and Son released *The Violin-Player* in novel form the same year. An advertisement for the publishers Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, characterized *The Violin-Player* as a "cheap popular novel," and an 1883 advertisement in *The Bookseller* lists the novel as selling for "two shillings" ("List" 32; "Chatto" 37). Despite its alleged "cheapness" in its time and its obscurity today, Thomas's novel merits renewed scholarly attention for its subversive depiction of a successful female violinist and its use of sound science to offer this depiction.

<19>Contemporary scientific notions of musical ability and memory inform Thomas's illustrations of Laurence's instinctive musical sensibility as a child. In the novel's opening scene, in a section titled "The Little Rebel," a passerby named Mr. Romer wanders the hills near the Lago Maggiore with his son and hears violin music – "a flashy, trashy air of Offenbach's" – emanating from a nearby wooden enclosure (1.3). He and his son stop and listen: "Certainly the precocious skill she displayed was sufficiently extraordinary, and even Mr. Romer must notice, with passing wonder, the nimbleness and flexibility of the little thing's fingers, the correctness of her intonation, and her spirited attempts at *bravura* passages on a toy-violin, probably picked up for a few francs at a fair" (1.5-6). Another bystander remarks that Laurence must be a "prodigy," to which someone else in the crowd replies, "She must have been put to it in her cradle" (1.8).

<20>The emphasis on Laurence's musical dexterity as a child resonates with Victorian-era scientific beliefs in the innateness of musical aptitude. In his posthumously published essay "Who Is Musical?" the Victorian surgeon and music aficionado (and friend of composer Johannes Brahms) Theodor Billroth insisted that the ability to determine rhythm and melody was an intrinsic skill (Billroth). Nineteenth-century phrenologists such as François Joseph Gall also believed that humans are born with musical characteristics and that musical skill is located in a particular part of the brain – an "organ for music" – that is larger in musical people than in non-musical people (Gall 59-60). *The Violin-Player's* early passages reveal that Laurence's musical abilities emerge as a child (perhaps even "in the cradle"), before she has had any musical training. Her musical aptitude – punctuated by her ability to play *bravura*, or virtuosic, passages – is innate and rooted in her body. Laurence's musicality is not unnatural or grotesque, as many Victorian-era thinkers would have us believe, but rather an organic force located in her "nimbl[e]" fingers.

<21>A subsequent passage highlights Laurence's capacity for "perfect pitch" or "absolute pitch," the rare ability to hear notes in their natural key and replicate them. A few scenes after she plays her "toy-violin," Laurence comes across a rustic house and is arrested by the sounds of music from within: "[W]hat riveted the child was the sound of music that had caught her ear. She listened entranced. Only a piano, a sweet voice, and a pretty valse. But it was long since Renza had heard anything so bewitching as that, anything better, indeed, than the scraping of her own violin-strings" (I.24). As the scene progresses, Laurence becomes a player as well as a listener. Laurence soon "put[s] her fiddle in tune, and without a moment's hesitation beg[ins] to play over the air she had just heard from the garden, and that still haunted her head" (I.28). When one of the ladies inside the house asks her where she "pick[ed] up that tune," she replies, "Outside in the garden five minutes ago" (I.28). This scene indicates Laurence's capacity for perfect pitch; after only one hearing, she is immediately able to put her violin "in tune" and reproduce the melody.

<22>Victorian scientists often discussed perfect pitch as a physiological trait. Alexander Ellis theorized that certain anatomical characteristics, such as the thickness of the tympanum in the ear, determined one's ability to capture melodies in the correct key (30). Similarly, R.H.M. Bosanquet wrote in his 1876 work *An Elementary Treatise on Musical Intervals and Temperament*,

I think that most musicians will agree that those who have a very high development of the sense of absolute pitch have their ears altogether more finely strung, and more acute, than other people. That is to say, if a man can tell me the exact sound of C and of any other note as he ordinarily uses them, without having any instrument to refer to, I consider that his musical organisation is such that his verdict on performances may be accepted without hesitation. (17-18)

Laurence's ability to replicate the music she hears signals her acute bodily proclivity for advanced musicianship – one clearly not inhibited by her female gender.

<23>This scene further highlights the corporeal nature of Laurence's musicality in its emphasis on musical memory. The phrase "haunted her head" not only indicates Laurence's physical absorption in the music she hears, but also associates her with phenomenon of the "earworm," a term nineteenth-century physiologists used to describe the process of getting a song stuck in one's head. The acoustician Edmund Gurney, for instance, wrote of music's ability to "arrest the ear and haunt the memory" – to "ge[t] into the blood and clin[g] to the memory" (116, 174). Similarly, the German psychologist Herman Ebbinghaus described this phenomenon as one of "involuntary memory retrieval" (2).

<24>Despite her natural musicality, however, Laurence still struggles to permeate the male-dominated world of professional musicianship because she is a woman. When Laurence moves to Germany as a young adult, the premiere violin instructor Professor Nielsen denies her entry into his studio because he refuses to teach women. After Laurence travels to Bleiburg and inquires after Nielsen – "marchin[g] off bravely by herself" to his studio – his assistant sends her a letter (I.99):

Professor Nielsen begs to say that he never, under any consideration, has taken or will take lady pupils, and this is a rule to which he can make no exception...Should Signor Allori's pupil be willing to give up the violin, and commence some other branch of study at the Academy of Bleiburg, Professor Nielsen will do what he can to assist her in obtaining admission from the authorities. (I.103)

This letter echoes the comments of Sutcliffe, Honeyman, and others who sought to restrict the world of violin performance to men. Laurence's friend Linda also urges her to learn the pianoforte: "After all, the violin is rather an awkward, unusual instrument for a lady to play" (I.104). Laurence, however, exhibits violent frustration at Nielsen's rejection: "He won't teach me or have anything to do with me, and all because – only because – I'm a girl...Does he think I can't work as hard as a boy, or even harder, or that I shall never play as well? O, if only I could *be* one, just for half an hour, to show him!" (I.102, 106). Following this exclamation, Laurence seizes a pair of scissors, cuts off her hair, and exclaims, "Should I do for a boy, now?" (I.107). The next day, she purchases boys' clothes and determines that she does not even need to change her name because, as her friend (and future lover) Gervase later points out, the name Laurence can refer to either gender; it is a boy's name in England, but a "girl's name in France" (I.203-4).

<25>In many ways, these moments evoke Judith Butler's now-classic concept of gender performativity – the notion that gender is based not on an essential, core aspect of the self, but rather on a "stylized repetition of acts through time" that culture associates with a specific gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 192). Laurence is able to "pass" convincingly as a man after a few simple external changes that help her to perform the "corporeal style" of masculinity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191). By dressing as a boy, she can actually "*be* one, just for half an hour" (I.106, emphasis original).

<26>The scene deviates from a strict alignment with Butler's notions of gender performativity, however, in its emphasis on the deeply embodied nature of Laurence's playing. As theorists such as Martha Nussbaum – and later, Butler herself – have discussed, the body occupies a problematic space in Butler's initial theories of gender performativity, as Butler insists that there is no "internal core or substance" of the body because it is always already constituted by regulatory societal norms (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 185).⁽¹²⁾ Yet, Thomas's novel deploys the idea of a bodily "core" to emphasize Laurence's musicality as an innate aspect of her bodily being. When Laurence returns to Professor Nielsen to audition as a boy, she impresses him with her virtuosity: "[S]omething took an abrupt hold of his attention. The *attaque* of the player in there had struck him...Well, there was a purity of tone, a command of resources...most unusual in wonder-children" (I.116). This passage – particularly with the words "attaque," "struck," and "command" – ascribes to Laurence traits of power, ability, and control. In the context of nineteenth-century sound science, the reference to the "purity" of her tone highlights her innate musical skill. Helmholtz, for instance, discussed the difficulty, based on the physics of sound, of achieving pure tones, as such sounds must have "both their force and phase exactly regulated...and communicated to the air" (Helmholtz 120). In order to achieve purity of tone, Helmholtz notes, there must be no "tremulousness" or "harshness" in the sound (Helmholtz 116). Through the reference to Laurence's "purity of tone," then, Thomas asserts Laurence's ability to produce forceful, clear, articulate sounds.

<27>At the same time that the novel shows the body's manipulability and contingency through performance, then, it also maintains the idea of a stable, innate corporeal life. Though such terms may ring essentialist to contemporary gender theorists, Thomas's novel deploys these concepts in order to defend and legitimize Laurence's musicality. Though Laurence obscures her gender, the tones of her music remain "pure." In the world of *The Violin-Player*, then, there is a "doer over the deed" – a stable, musical body that persists despite "stylized acts."⁽¹³⁾ While gender may be performative, musicality is innate.

<28>Laurence's playing not only manifests as the forceful actions of her own body, but also affects Nielsen on a visceral level. As he listens to her play "a composition...full of difficulties – passages it might puzzle an advanced student to decipher correctly off-hand" – his face displays "a contortion indicative of pleasure," and he "bend[s] forwards, listening with the intense and entire application of mind peculiar to those whose energies have all been appropriated to one purpose" (I.116-117). Victorian acousticians emphasized music's ability to produce kinesthetic responses in listeners. Helmholtz, Tyndall, and Gurney, for instance, discussed the "muscular energies" aroused by music. Gurney wrote that "[i]n melody...there is perpetually involved something more even than a suggestion of movement, namely, a direct impulse to move; which is not only felt but constantly yielded to in varying degrees" (Gurney 103). In this context, Laurence's violin playing precipitates Nielsen's bodily contortions. Through her music, Laurence is able to reverse the power dynamic established when Nielsen rejected her from the studio, as she gains a form of physical control over his (male) body. By having Laurence dress in drag but letting the readers in on Laurence's

deception, Thomas ascribes to Laurence the kind of powerful artistry usually reserved for men and exposes the hypocrisy of those who, like Nielsen, thwart the ambitions of female musicians.

<29>It is not just Nielsen who is physically affected by Laurence's music. Laurence's future fiancé, an Englishman named Gervase Damian, also experiences intense physiological reactions to the music of the "boy" violinist. Midway through the novel, Laurence plays,

soon becoming forgetful even of his [Gervase's] presence. At such moments the outside world was almost non-existent for the little musician. Laurence had early acquired the power of thus throwing all the nerve-force in her – so to speak – into one channel as she played... 'The little fellow's a real genius,' thought Gervase, struck beyond all anticipation as he listened. He was the merest amateur in music; but genius is like the sun, its rays penetrate wise and ignorant alike. He was now contemplating the violin-player with an intentness of interest, which Laurence fortunately was too abstracted to perceive.
(I.199-200)

Laurence's drag status, of course, tinges this scene with intimations of homoerotic desire, punctuated by the reference to Laurence's genius as "penetrat[ive]" and Gervase's resultant "intentness of interest."⁽¹⁴⁾ More importantly, though, this scene emphasizes the corporeal effects of Laurence's music on her own body and on those of her listeners. As mentioned earlier, the phrase "throwing all the nerve-force in her" calls to mind scientific discoveries of the role of the nerves in musical production, such as Tyndall's notion that the nerves of the human body gather musical information from the environment (i.e. sound waves in the air) and transmit it to the brain (Tyndall 1-2). It is this "nerve-force" that leaves Gervase "struck beyond all anticipation."

<30>The narrative ultimately rewards rather than punishes Laurence for her gender subversion. When Laurence reveals her identity to Professor Nielsen two years later, he agrees to continue teaching her and even lets her play for the violin master Araciel at a concert in Bleiburg. Nielsen insists, "If I forgive you, it is not because I take back my words, but because there is something higher and stronger than my will or than yours. Music is above even its professors" (I.266). Here, Nielsen articulates the Romantic notion that music is something that transcends human lives and wills; yet, his statement has more import here, as it hints that music can transcend the kinds of societal strictures that would limit Laurence's musicality based on her gender. While Nielsen hails music's status as a transcendent or *disembodied* entity – existing apart from the material world and its constraints – readers remember that music is also, paradoxically, a deeply physical art form that has the capacity to viscerally affect listeners. The novel depicts music as an innate and embodied human experience that transcends artificial societal codes. Gender, the novel indicates, does not determine musical skill – only the perception of it.

<31>Importantly, Laurence's musical power only augments when she plays as a woman. After Laurence reveals herself, she plays "snatches of music – "wild Spanish songs and dances; Madame murmured delight; and Gervase was silent, all but his eyes. He made all sorts of excuses to himself for letting them utter the feeling that was insensibly mastering him" (II.218). Laurence harnesses the power to "master" her audience members – both male and female. After the performance, Gervase exclaims, "The miracles of electricity go no further!" – a phrase that punctuates the physical (and scientifically-based) power of Laurence's music (II.219).

<32>As the novel progresses, the narrator emphasizes the universal nature of Laurence's musical influence – its capacity to arouse physiological sensations in a wide variety of listeners. In a later scene, Laurence's performance causes her future teacher Araciel's face to "bea[m] with pleasure and excitement" (I.278). Similarly, her old friend Linda and her companion Bruno hear Laurence's music while they are traveling in Italy: "[S]he stopped short, as a penetrating sound broke on the evening stillness...The pair listened motionless awhile, holding their breath" (III.241). These scenes suggest that even when she performs as a woman, Laurence inspires physical rapture in her audiences.

<33>The novel also casts Laurence's musical influence as automatic and inevitable; her audiences cannot help but be affected by her playing. When Laurence performs at the opening of the Fenice Theatre in Venice, for example, she entrances her audience members with music otherwise unappealing to Venetians:

The Hungarian airs which Araciel had chosen for her to play were too fantastic to appeal to that crowd. Venice is passionate, not romantic; realistic, not imaginative. That Laurence should make that music please those men was, in a technical sense, impossible. But frown and shrug though they might, they soon found they must look and listen too. As one after another of those wild stirring airs followed, the veriest Gallios present that night found the music they depreciated affect them strangely, keenly, delightfully; it set the lover thinking of his love, woke fancies in the artist, soothed the discontented, elated the light-hearted. Some essence went abroad as she played that heightened the joyousness of life and idealised its sadness. Such is the mysterious alchemy of music, which, falling on barren and desolated hearts, can make fresh thoughts, fresh feelings grow. To come down from the clouds, those would-be detractors were men, with heads, hearts, pulses, feelings, intelligence; and genius has a pass-key to all natures. Once conquered, an Italian audience is generosity itself. Vociferous calls and recalls and deafening acclamations followed now. (II.34-6)

Laurence compels otherwise unaffected men to stop and listen to her music. She is neither the diva nor the siren, but rather the musician who compels an unlikely audience with her natural and organic musicality. The power she exerts is tangible and visceral; it affects the "heads, hearts, pulses" of her listeners – a phrase that evokes nineteenth-century sound theorists' discussions of music's effects on the brain, muscles, and nerves of the human body. Even

though Laurence plays pieces that are “too fantastic” for the Venetians, her musical genius – rooted in her own body and with the capacity to affect the bodies of others – represents a “pass-key to all natures.”

<34>Elsewhere, Laurence’s violin playing affects another unlikely audience – the rats in her Bleiburg apartment: “Laurence was wont to stay practicing almost without break from morning to night...fiddling away to an audience of rats, who listened spellbound or stopped their ears as might be, during the patient iteration of scales and exercises” (I.128). Here, Laurence’s music evokes visceral responses in her animal listeners, punctuated by the word “spellbound” and the references to the rats’ ears. While this scene may at first appear silly or fanciful, it in fact echoes contemporary scientific discoveries about music’s capacity to arouse embodied responses in animals as well as humans and signals the universality of audiences’ visceral responses to Laurence’s music. Victorian aurists such as David Tod and William Hyde Wollaston discovered the hearing mechanisms of animals. Tod wrote that animals actually possess “remarkable” powers of hearing: “Only witness how fond the lizard is on hearing a lively air, – how he erects his head with one side generally higher than the other, and opens his mouth” (58). Wollaston insisted that animals and insects hear wider ranges of sounds than humans do. For example, grylli insects hear “sharper sounds, which we do not know to exist” (314). Laurence’s music thus represents an embodied force that enacts inevitable and universal influence on her listeners. Whether misogynistic music professors, traditionalist Venetians, or scurrying rats, Laurence’s audiences cannot help but be affected by her music.

<35>At times, Laurence performs so frequently – with engagements in Germany, Austria, Sweden, Italy, and England – and with such intense bodily involvement that others fear she will expire. In one scene, Laurence plays with such intensity that she fights against a “threatened collapse of physical strength...She would play, and play admirably, up to the last, but by dint of draining the very springs of nervous energy” (III.93-4). The reference to “nervous energy” again echoes Helmholtz’s discoveries about music’s effects on the nerves and further punctuates the physical intensity of Laurence’s playing. Some, such as her manager Emanuel Cuscus, fear she lacks the physical strength to keep performing. Articulating a claim similar to those promoted by Le Plieur or Honeyman, Cuscus insists that Laurence “[p]uts too much of herself into her playing...Women always do. They and their music are merged, not merely connected. If they had our strength, they would surpass us every way; but they haven’t and their method wears them out” (III.23). Laurence’s audiences become morbidly fascinated by her energetic performances, which they believe might precipitate her demise: “People said she was killing herself, and flocked to hear her with redoubled alacrity, as their manner is” (III.93). Yet, in defiance of her naysayers, Laurence resolves to play with even more strength and authority: “To-day, as if to challenge and put to rebuke the last sceptics or detractors, she had selected to play some of the most trying pieces in a violinist’s *repertoire*, – compositions certain to tax the finest faculties, and lay bare any weak point” (III.98). The references to the physical intensity of Laurence’s playing, then, highlight her immense physical strength and her capacity to harness the power of music to its fullest extent. By pairing the chorus of doubt about Laurence’s

strength with Laurence's repeated assertion of her musical power, Thomas offers a stark rejoinder to Victorian thinkers who questioned the "muscular power" of female musicians.

<36>As Gillett, Auerbach, and others have noted, most Victorian narratives that feature female musicians conclude by tempering their heroines' successes and abilities. Eliot's Alcharisi and Armgart both lose their voices, and Ward's Rose and Fothergill's May abandon their musical careers when they marry. In a drastic departure from these narratives, however, *The Violin-Player* ends with a triumphant celebration of Laurence's performing career: "In Italy, Germany – all over the Continent, indeed – Mdlle. Therval now rejoices in a name so illustrious that he who should forget himself so far as to speak of her with moderation is likely to be branded as a raging iconoclast" (III.180). Though for most of the novel, Laurence resolves not to marry – insisting, "I will not forsake what I have lived for all these years" – she does ultimately fall in love with and consent to marry Gervase, feeling she "touche[s] the tidemark of her highest force" when he is in the audience (II.220, III.104).⁽¹⁵⁾ After they become engaged, she embarks on a London tour and feels anew the "excitement of performing" and her "old nervous energy" (III.219). However, Gervase's sudden death brings an abrupt end to this marriage plot.⁽¹⁶⁾ Though Laurence is devastated by Gervase's death, she maintains her performing career. Araciél remarks, "It is the music...that will save her to us...She will live now" (III.300). Towards the end of the novel, Laurence's old friend Val remarks that Laurence's musical ability only seems to augment over time: "As she herself could never have played formerly: it was more forcible, earnest, and pathetic. To Val she seemed to have added something to the divinity of music by her genius for its interpretation. The clamorous applause in the theatre jarred on him" (III.299).⁽¹⁷⁾ Laurence's narrative thus ends not in marriage, domesticity, or death, but with jarring applause.

<37>With the continued proliferation of studies of music in nineteenth-century literature, Thomas's underexplored novel represents a fruitful site for further study. Not only does it offer a counter-narrative to common (and often canonical) illustrations of female musicians, but it also brings to light the utility of Victorian sound science in offering such a depiction. By harnessing contemporary scientific understandings of the physics and physiology of sound, and by bringing them to bear to showcase a female musician who can channel her nerve force, create sonic vibrations, and arouse the convulsions, palpitations, and heartbeats of her listeners, Thomas is able to foreground her heroine's musical abilities as natural, organic, and thus undeniable. While some Victorian thinkers invoked the body to describe women as failed musicians or to highlight their physical limitations, Thomas mobilized the connections between physiology and music to advance a radical societal critique. In doing so, Thomas offered an imagination of female musical talent that might have otherwise been – like sound itself – invisible.

Endnotes

(1)For more on the state of the field of music-literature studies, see Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff, "Introduction" (*The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction* 2004); Weliver, "A Score of

Change" (*Literature Compass* 2011); and Anna Peak, "The Condition of Music in Victorian Scholarship" (*Victorian Literature and Culture* 2016).^(^)

(2)For more, please see da Sousa Correa, "Opera," 164-6; Clapp-Itnyre, *Angelic*, 180-1; and Weliver, *Women*, 195.^(^)

(3)"Heroine" figures most often sing or play piano – an instrument that, as musicologist Paula Gillett writes, was not threatening to Victorian values of female docility and modesty as it involved "no awkward motions or altered facial distortions" (Gillett 4).^(^)

(4)For more, please see Beryl Gray, *George Eliot and Music* (1989). See also Clapp-Itnyre, "Indecent," 129; Weliver, *Women*, 17; Alison Byerly, *Realism*, 133-4; and Auerbach, *Maestros*, 178.^(^)

(5)For more on physiological aesthetics in nineteenth-century thought, see Morgan, *The Outward Mind*.^(^)

(6)For more on Neruda's biography, please see Clapham and Kennedy.^(^)

(7)Part of the reason for the LSO's domination by men, Morrison writes, was that personnel negotiating and hiring often occurred in traditionally "male" venues, such as the "Glue Pot" pub, a favorite haunt of LSO members (Morrison 186-7). Though the LSO had two female harpists from its beginning, female musicians were not admitted to other sections of the orchestra until the First World War and after (Morrison 187).^(^)

(8)Though he doubted that "women, collectively, will ever be equal to men in muscular power," Honeyman did acknowledge that women could work to develop their muscular strength (Honeyman 74).^(^)

(9)Their father was John Thomas of Glamorganshire, who became the Canon of Canterbury in 1862 (Blain et al. 1074-5). Their mother was Maria Thomas (Blain et al. 1074-5).^(^)

(10)According to an August 1892 review in *The Musical Times*, "The theatre was crowded by a friendly audience, and the composer and authoress were warmly called at the end of the performance" ("Music in Liverpool" 491).^(^)

(11)I am grateful to Sophie Fuller for bringing Frances Thomas and her career as a clarinetist to my attention at the Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain Conference in June 2017.^(^)

(12)The body has famously posed a problem for Butler's theories of gender performativity, which she has revised and adapted in later works. After the publication of *Gender Trouble* (1990), thinkers such as Nussbaum critiqued Butler for what they perceived as her lack of attention to the body and its material realities. In "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler" (*The New Republic*, 1999), for instance, Nussbaum writes "[I]t is much too simple to say that power is all that the body is" (Nussbaum). In her later works, including *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler offers forms of self-

critique by considering corporeal realities, such as the daily bodily threats that transvesties encounter. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler writes that after *Gender Trouble*, friends asked her, “What about the materiality of the body, Judy? ... an effort ... to recall me to a bodily life that could not be theorised away ... for surely bodies live and eat; eat and sleep; feel pain and pleasure; endure illness and violence; and these facts ... cannot be dismissed as mere construction” (Butler, *Bodies* viii). Since *Bodies that Matter*, queer and disability theorists have located the body as a central site for radical critique. See, for example, Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (2002); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (1994), and Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory* (2006).^(^)

(13)In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (invoking Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*) writes, “My argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, *Gender* 195).^(^)

(14)The interchange between Gervase and Laurence in this scene even borders on flirtatious; Laurence “colour[s]” as Gervase asks Laurence questions about her accent and her heritage (I.201). The homoerotic potential of this moment quickly evaporates, however; once Gervase learns Laurence is French and recalls that Laurence is a “girl’s name in France,” he realizes Laurence is a woman (I.204). He promises to keep her secret “as religiously as if [he] were the confessional-box” (I.205). Throughout the next few chapters, Gervase indeed keeps Laurence’s secret, even telling his mother Mrs. Damian that Laurence is “to be the Paganini of the period” (I.231).^(^)

(15)Laurence initially refuses Gervase, writing to him, “I am leaving Rome; leaving you, and for always, if it must be so...The world holds us apart” (II.249). She later turns down another marriage proposal from a “second-rate baritone’s deputy” named Tristan, whom she tells, “I cherish my liberty. I should not make a good wife to you. I see now I am never to live but for music” (III.7, III.52).^(^)

(16)In an odd sensationalist moment, Linda’s brother Bruno Pagano, against whom Gervase once brought charges of robbery, pushes Gervase off of a cliff.^(^)

(17)Though there is some insinuation that Val wishes to become Laurence’s romantic partner, in the final scene, he sees her hand resting on her violin-case and realizes that “[i]n there lay her only life-companion. He understood” (III.319). The final sentence of the novel emphasizes Laurence’s singular commitment to her music: “[S]he wanders through the world again alone, with a loyal old comrade – her violin” (III.320).^(^)

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