



# **PIONEER VIOLIN *VIRTUOSE* IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

**MAUD POWELL, MARIE HALL, AND ALMA MOODIE: A  
GENDERED RE-EVALUATION**

Tatjana Goldberg



# Pioneer Violin *Virtuose* in the Early Twentieth Century

Tatjana Goldberg reveals the extent to which gender and socially constructed identity influenced female violinists' 'separate but unequal' status in a great male-dominated virtuoso lineage by focussing on the few that stood out: the American Maud Powell (1867–1920), Australian-born Alma Moodie (1898–1943), and the British Marie Hall (1884–1956). Despite breaking down traditional gender-based patriarchal social and cultural norms, becoming celebrated soloists, and greatly contributing towards violin works and the early recording industry (Powell and Hall), they received little historical recognition. Goldberg provides a more complete picture of their artistic achievements and the impact they had on audiences.

**Tatjana Goldberg** started learning the violin in Croatia, and later went to study violin at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. In 2016 she was awarded her PhD from City, University of London. She teaches the violin at City, University of London, Middlesex University, the Purcell School, and the Youth Music Centre in London. She has a broad experience as a performer and writer.



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# **Pioneer Violin *Virtuose* in the Early Twentieth Century**

Maud Powell, Marie Hall, and Alma  
Moodie: A Gendered Re-Evaluation

**Tatjana Goldberg**

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**To the memory of my parents and to my family**



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# Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>1 She wants to play the violin!</b>	6
<i>The emergence of the violin virtuose</i>	6
<b>2 The ‘angelic’ counterparts</b>	24
<b>3 Maud Powell: I must carry a message as long as I am able</b>	46
<i>Setting the context</i>	46
<i>Maud Powell: larger than prejudice</i>	48
<i>Conquering America</i>	50
<i>Powell’s musical ‘crusades’ in Europe</i>	55
<i>Pioneering ‘balanced’ programmes</i>	60
<i>Violin concertos premiered in America by Maud Powell</i>	64
<i>Premiering American compositions</i>	69
<i>Maud Powell’s transcriptions</i>	71
<i>Maud Powell’s cadenza for the Brahms violin concerto</i>	73
<i>Maud Powell’s place in the history of the early recording industry</i>	77
<b>4 Marie Pauline Hall: transcending limitations</b>	94
<i>Marie Hall’s collaborations with Vaughan Williams and Edward Elgar</i>	104
<i>Elgar’s violin concerto and Marie Hall’s recording</i>	106
<b>5 Alma Moodie: from praise to oblivion</b>	119
<i>Alma Moodie’s life: art and politics</i>	121
<i>Alma Moodie, champion of modern repertoire</i>	134



<b>6</b>	<b><i>Virtuose's shared experiences towards the hall of fame</i></b>	<b>153</b>
	<i>Discography and scores</i>	168
	<i>Index</i>	169

# Illustrations

## Figures

1.1	Teresa and Maria Milanollo 1887	10
1.2	Wilma Norman-Neruda 1889	10
1.3	Camilla Urso circa 1860/1870	12
2.1	Maud Powell's Art, advertisement by Walter Anthony	32
3.1	Joseph Joachim's violin class 1885 with Powell in the light-coloured dress	50
3.2	Maud Powell and Mary Davenport-Engberg with the Bellingham Symphony	54
3.3	The Maud Powell String Quartet, 1894–1895	55
3.4	Sousa and Powell circa 1903	57
3.5	Maud Powell Trio, 1908	58
3.6	Powell's programme for her recital in Ohio, 9 November 1915, with Powell's explanations of the pieces that helped her introduce works	62
3.7	Powell's cadenza for the first movement of Johannes Brahms's Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 77	75
3.8	Maud Powell signing records, 1910s	78
3.9	Bach, <i>Bourée</i> from Solo Partita in B minor, BWV 1002, bars 19–39	80
3.10	<i>Old Black Joe</i> , from <i>Plantation Melodies</i> , bars 23–5	81
3.11	<i>Hejre Kati</i> , bars 1–22; see Powell's Naxos CD8.110963	82
3.12	Maud Powell, 1919, Bushnell Studio, Seattle, Washington	85
4.1	Sarasate's <i>Jota Aragonesa</i> , Op. 27 from bar 74 where Hall uses wider vibrato on longer note values	103
4.2	Opening of Elgar Violin Concerto, Op. 61	109
5.1a	A page from <i>Der Deutsche Rundfunk</i>	120
5.1b	Detail highlighted on the left of the same page	121
5.2	Moodie's letter to Reinhart dated 12 May 1923	139
5.3	Moodie's letter to Flesch dated 11 March 1924	140
5.4	Alma Moodie 'playing' with Bartók's theme	141

**Tables**

3.1	Powell's performances with the Brooklyn Philharmonic and the Thomas Orchestra	52
3.2	Powell's performances at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts	56
3.3	Violin concertos premiered in America by Maud Powell	68
4.1	Performances by Marie Hall listed in the BBC Proms archive	100
5.1	Performances by Alma Moodie listed in the BBC Proms archive	129

# Preface

The publication of this book was prompted by a passion to share my understanding of the complex world of pioneer violin *virtuose*. So many of them remain in the shadows of the great (male) virtuosi, unjustifiably inconspicuous and inadequately acknowledged. This account is concerned with exposing the fact that the prevailing pattern of (white male) violin virtuosi exclusivity has for a long time been obscured from public discussion. By exploring biographical accounts and the artistic legacy of several important late nineteenth-century women violinists, this book aims to present an alternative, feminist perspective that will allow for a better assessment of their legacy and re-instate them in the history of violin playing.<sup>1</sup>

My own interest in female violinists started many years ago, when I was studying the violin at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. Over the course of time, I discovered a significant phenomenon: violin *virtuose* whose names were known only to a limited number of connoisseurs. Who were these artists, who for decades managed to fascinate contemporary composers, managers, critics, and public alike whilst performing with many of the great European and American conductors and orchestras? Why has so little attention been given to their artistic legacy in the history of violin playing? And exactly what is that legacy today?

Their life stories are fascinating. They reached pinnacles of glory and depths of despair and struggled to succeed in the face of extraordinary prejudice against professional female musicians. Sadly, these once celebrated artists, who dedicated their lives to the development of modern violin playing, contemporary violin literature, and the early recording industry, have faded from public memory. The result is that we have lost sight of the important role that they played in our violinistic heritage.

From my own research, I was constantly surprised to see the names of great contemporaries – violin virtuosi, composers, teachers, conductors, writers, and lovers – who crossed these women's paths. Here is just a selection: Max Bruch, Igor Stravinsky, Edward Elgar, Antonín Dvořák, Jean Sibelius, Paul Hindemith, Béla Bartók, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ernst Krenek, Joseph Joachim, Leopold Auer, Eugène Ysaÿe, Fritz Kreisler, Theodore Thomas, Adrian Boult, Rainer Maria Rilke, etc. Why did so many great figures associate themselves with these *virtuose*? Were they fascinated because these young, talented violinists, thriving

in the masculine world of music, were beautiful, charming, and even seductive women? Or was it because of their remarkable artistry and their life-long devotion to music?

An initial concern was how exactly to present these extraordinary women without giving a distorted image of their lives or their artistry. And how could I evaluate their artistic legacy when some of them left no recordings? I immersed myself deeply in the existing historical literature and spent many hours listening to acoustic recordings. It quickly became clear that the lives and artistry of many pioneer *virtuose* had been neither intensively researched nor well presented. At the time of writing, for example, there exists no detailed collective and comprehensive account in English of women violinists and their artistic legacy. Furthermore, the East European violin *virtuose* continue to be at the periphery of research – including, it must be said, in this book, which in turn suggests a way to stimulate future lines of scholarship. This account does not try to be all-inclusive, nor does it pretend to have solved all the problems of writing violin history. With a subject of this size, my primary effort has been to free some important pioneer violinists from their historical shadows.

On closer inspection, I realised that in order to do justice to these extraordinary women and re-evaluate their legacy, I would have to consider another invaluable source of information. I would need to look at their own manuscripts, together with photographs, excerpts from magazines, newspaper interviews, and reviews, as well as their recordings. My own investigation about an American *virtuosa*, Maud Powell (1867–1920), started with Karen Shaffer's biographies *Maud Powell: Pioneer American Violinist* (1988) and *Maud Powell Favorites* (2009). They contain much reference material along with critics' commentaries, interviews, advertisements, and publicity material. I am grateful to Karen Shaffer for this noble effort, as I am equally grateful to her for welcoming my efforts to write this book. References to the British *virtuosa* Marie Hall (1884–1956) had been rather sketchily inventoried; some letters were barely readable and therefore required a considerable amount of cross-referencing. However, thanks to her eminence in the musical world and her willingness to engage with the press, her activities and thinking were fairly well recorded in print. The main sources on Australian-born Alma Moodie (1898–1943) were Kay Dreyfus's article 'Alma Moodie and the Landscape of Giftedness' (2003) and her recently published book, *Bluebeard's Bride: Alma Moodie, Violinist* (2014). Throughout my book, I have turned by necessity to Dreyfus for facts and comments that I have been unable to find elsewhere, and for that I am hugely grateful. I should also add that whilst I have nothing but the sincerest admiration for Shaffer and Dreyfus, whose affection and understanding of the subject comes through in every page, I wanted to investigate Powell's and Moodie's lives, careers, and their artistic legacy more specifically in the context of the impact of gender bias.

In the material that Alma Moodie left behind, I researched her correspondence with her mentor Werner Reinhart, written between 1920 and 1925, from which some of the quotations were extracted. They were written with her characteristic handwriting in English, German, and French, languages between which she often

alternated. When we read them today, many decades later, we can only be astonished by her ambition and desire to live life as unreservedly and unsparingly as she did. Similar to Maud Powell and Marie Hall, Alma Moodie was strongly opinionated and openly expressed her opinions about her life as a travelling *virtuosa*. With a sharp sense of humour and a degree of candour unusual for a woman at the dawn of the twentieth century, she vividly described her contemporaries, friends, intimate relationships, composers, and musical life. It was a stroke of luck that her letters and a few photographs were saved for posterity, since Moodie's recordings seem to have been lost forever.

Whilst researchers such as Clive Brown, Robert Philip, and David Milsom have already undertaken sophisticated and detailed analysis of nineteenth-century violinists' practice and recordings, in the course of my research I determined that in order to have a more complete picture of their artistic legacy, a change of focus was necessary. Although recordings shed much light on the performing style and habits of women in my research, they do not precisely document their gradual evolution. The greatest value of this is that it forced me to question why recordings were, until now, taken as the primary source providing a key to our understanding of these violinists' performing styles. I had the impression that the historical judgement would have been rather different if these women had either recorded the *modern* pieces that they premiered or if they had been able to make recordings after 1925, when the electric microphone was introduced. This book therefore concentrates on other important and hitherto neglected sources, such as their collaborations with contemporary composers and their creative input into the works they premiered.

With this in mind, I aim to introduce and promote the artistry of these important violinists to a new generation of players who have, perhaps, neither come across their names nor heard their relatively few old recordings. I also intend to engage with not only violinists but also musicologists, contemporary historians, and collectors of historical recordings, as well as the general public who might be interested in broadening their knowledge of women's contribution to the art. The resulting book is, I hope, an interesting and readable portrait of some of the most important pioneer *virtuose* whose impact on the development of violin playing is often overlooked.

The publication of this book has largely been made possible because of the enthusiasm of Annie Vaughan and Heidi Bishop, who handled all editorial and publishing details and turned my fondest hopes into a wonderful reality. Whilst the book has brought me a deep-seated joy, it also required personal sacrifice. Researching and writing in conjunction with a full-time job required isolation from friends and family. I am deeply grateful to my husband, who had the grace to share my passion for the artistry of violin *virtuose* of the past and who has generously given me important encouragement over the last two years. Throughout my work on this book, he has continually reminded me about the necessity of being impartial when my enthusiasm got the better of me. Thank you, Nigel, for your humour, which always moved and inspired me to finish this book.

It has been my good fortune to meet so many generous and knowledgeable people in the process of completing this book. I shall always be grateful to Dr Ian Pace for his perception of the historic importance of the violinists I researched and for sharing his expertise and probing my mind. I wish to extend thanks to many friends and colleagues for their enthusiasm and encouragement at various stages of writing this book. My heartfelt appreciation goes to my sister Gordana Grubić-Andvari, who generously gave her time and knowledge when I needed it. Thank you for challenging me to think for myself and for your continued emotional support. A special blessing goes to my late mother-in-law, who translated essential German texts and who always made me feel so loved.

On a personal note, I am deeply grateful to my family Grubić and my dear grandmother for their unconditional love and support. You always made me feel like a strong, independent, and talented person. From the time you all so tragically perished during the Bosnian war (1992–1995), I have missed our daily laughs and our creative, though sometimes difficult, family life. I feel your presence and influence always and will cherish your memory for the rest of my life.

Finally, I am grateful to Maud Powell, Marie Hall, and Alma Moodie for being great artists who opened a door for many to come. A new generation of principal women violinists – Ida Haendel, Ginnette Neveu, Erica Morini, Kyung-wha Chung, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Janine Jansen, Hilary Hahn, Sarah Chang, and Julia Fischer, to name just a few – are continuing the legacy begun by these pioneer violin *virtuose*.

## Note

- 1 It is important to underline that the world of the violin is a site of complex and crosscutting inequalities of class, ‘race’, and gender. Whilst I do not intend to undermine other markers of difference such as ‘race’ and class, the aim is to expose the intellectual microcosm of the history of the violin as institutionalised misogyny.

# Introduction

The fame of a Paganini, of an Ernst, of a Joachim, of a Sarasate, is a fame, which women have proved themselves fully worthy to share.<sup>1</sup>

There is hardly a better way to begin a book about pioneer violin *virtuose*, yet the view expressed in this quotation has been a minority one. Historical accounts would have us believe that all ‘wizards’, ‘kings’, ‘devils’, and even ‘Messiahs’ of the violin have been men. Although violinists such as Teresa Milanollo (1827–1904), Wilma Norman-Neruda (1842–1902), Camilla Urso (1842–1902), Maud Powell (1867–1920), Marie Hall (1884–1956), Alma Moodie (1898–1943), and others shared the same socio-musical space as their respected male counterparts, they have been excluded from the more widely accepted group of the ‘greatest’.

Historians have glorified the masculinity and potency of great male virtuosi, and arguments for the supremacy of the masculine performing style have been remarkably resilient over the course of time. Violin heroines’ ‘great but not equal’ status has reflected patriarchal, social, and cultural values and, indeed, has reinforced their position as ‘the other’ (something that the history of violin has not fully recognised). The chief aim of this book is to recover the female side of the history of violin playing. It continues to be woefully incomplete without pioneer *virtuose*. This account is interested in stressing the importance of these, once the most celebrated musicians at the dawn of the twentieth century, and asserting the range and significance of their contribution to the evolution of the art of violin playing.

In order to clarify the effect of gender bias upon the reception of pioneer violin *virtuose* and their historical legacy, I examine the following constructs: the concept of virtuoso identity, the negotiation of power in the history of the violin, and a gendered definition of the violin as a female instrument that must have a (male) ‘master’. Further, as such constructs manifest in the form of gender domination, this book raises pivotal questions: accepting that it is innately difficult to find essential properties that might be integral to female violin playing, what are the politics involved in the establishment and evaluation of violin *virtuose* careers? And how can we understand the rise of female violinists and their particular achievements without understanding the gendered nature of the public spheres in



## 2 Introduction

society and the management of the musical world, since the overwhelming majority of those engaged in its organisation and practice have been men? There has been a notable absence of debates around gender bias in the intellectual microcosm of the history of the violin, and this needs to be exposed. It is in no way my intention to undermine the undoubted historical achievements of the great male violin virtuosi. But their dominance of the narrative must be understood in terms of gender politics.

By dismantling and unsettling the late nineteenth-century societal constructions of what it meant to be a woman violinist, this book re-frames the important achievements of several violinists on every level – social, artistic, and commercial. I stress that whilst male performers had access to privileged knowledge, bestowed on them by education and social awards, female performers were faced with the challenging task of defining themselves both as women and as artists. In tracing the scope and nature of their public success, a paradox becomes apparent: in an age when most female instrumentalists were consigned to the parlour, and musical talent in a female was generally regarded only as an asset in the marriage market, violin *virtuose* established prominent national and international careers and gained immense public appreciation and the respect of critics. The recognition of their artistry is even more intriguing when we consider that they were born in an age when women's access to musical training was severely limited, and the nineteenth-century bourgeois world contained only pockets of limited opportunities for exemplary erudition and female advancement in general. In order to address this incongruity, the book considers the means by which female violinists' pre-eminence was negotiated, traversing the social, the cultural, and the musical.

Close examination of biographical accounts of Maud Powell (1867–1920), Marie Hall (1884–1956), and Alma Moodie (1898–1943) exposes the gendered assumptions surrounding their careers, and historical receptions are exposed. Particular attention is drawn to their concert reviews, which enable readers to grasp how performers' gender issues were addressed. These women are some of the most compelling figures in the art of violin playing, both reflecting and inspiring debate between femininity and performance. Seen through the lens of gender studies, the appeal of these violinists lay in their brave confrontation with social norms, in their carefully cultivated public personas, and in the strength and authority of their musical voices. At a time when both church and society rigidly enforced rules regarding women's participation in public performances, they had the courage to continue to advance their careers after marriage and childbearing. Whilst social norms promoted female singers and male virtuosi, through their appearances on concert platforms *virtuose* encouraged other women to study the violin professionally in order to take their equal place alongside male musicians. They were among the exceptional few who performed with many great European and American conductors and orchestras. Finally, Powell and Hall recognised the importance of recordings for the popularisation of music and became the first female violinists with an extensive recording legacy.

Years of research has shown that there is no clear evidence that the artistry of these remarkable violinists was secondary to their male counterparts, such

as Pablo de Sarasate (1844–1908), Eugène Ysaÿe (1858–1931), Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962), and Jacques Thibaud (1880–1953), among others. Powell, Hall, and Moodie were often praised for all the qualities valued in their male contemporaries' violin playing – the power and beauty of tone, the dramatic emotions their playing conveyed, and the virtuosity and musicianship they showed through performances. Nineteenth-century socially and culturally derived notions of womanhood were incongruent with the long-established patriarchal violin virtuoso identity, yet they had the necessary courage to challenge accepted notions of male-centred virtuosity and thereby slowly transform perceptions of the virtuoso as a masterful female violinist.

Through this research, the intention has been to unsettle and trouble taken-for-granted understanding of the primacy of virtuosos in expanding public consciousness of contemporary works, so that an alternative understanding might be considered. The book asserts that Powell, Hall, and Moodie were determined to leave their mark on history by promoting contemporary violin works, something that has remained unexplored in the broader artistic and cultural context of the era in question. Significantly, they publicly promoted large-scale violin pieces that were considered by their male counterparts to be 'unplayable' or too difficult for female violinists to perform, something that is too rarely acknowledged. With this comes a suggestion that the historical performance accounts create difficulties, as the marginalised positioning of the violin *virtuose* illustrates the way in which a sense of otherness was conferred upon them.

Traditionally, violinists were appraised in terms of their dazzling virtuosity, their contribution to the development of technique, and their original stylistic innovations. A review of relevant literature and early recordings confirms a link between the evolution of modern violin playing and the performing style of male virtuosos. However, the approach here departs from the research tradition of performance practice and aims to highlight the matching importance of Powell, Hall, and Moodie for the developing stylistic 'traits and trends' at the dawn of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Attention is turned to several then-contemporary violin works dedicated to them; these provide a framework through which it is possible not only to demonstrate their pioneering attitude but also give us a broader understanding of their changing performance style, something that has remained unexplored in the broader artistic and cultural context of the era in question. Apart from that, a relevant analysis of a relatively small sample of Powell's and Hall's recordings is proposed. The purpose of this is to find evidence that their playing already possessed more progressive stylistic tendencies, similar to their contemporaries such as Sarasate, Ysaÿe, and Hubay, and to outline their matching importance for the birth of a more modern style of playing.

Further, this book touches on the treatment of several other pioneer violin heroines who swam against the tide and broke down traditional patriarchal cultural norms in order to become celebrated soloists and leaders of chamber groups and symphony orchestras, yet are persistently marginalised. Throughout the history of violin playing, the fact of women being perceived not as instrumentalists in their own right but pejoratively as 'female violinists' created enormous obstacles

## 4 Introduction

to be overcome in combating misperceptions about their abilities. From a feminist research point of view, this has been of most significance, because many gender expectations defined and limited their perceived 'encroachment' on what had previously been considered all-male territory and thus contributed significantly to the emergence of the élite male virtuosi tradition in the history of the violin. Through exploring violin *virtuose* experiences and life stories, the following chapters bring insights derived from feminism and gender studies to bear upon the complex world of pioneer violin *virtuose* and enable readers to reflect upon its implications.

The book is divided into six chapters. The introduction is intended to set out broad aims and objectives. The first chapter explores the women violinists' ties to corporeality, gender, and society. Particular attention is drawn to gender-based preconceptions and socially constructed gender identity, which had an influential effect on both repression of female violinists' musical practices throughout history and their acceptance. The key aesthetic ideals surrounding late nineteenth-century violin playing and gender-based perceptions of musical instruments are outlined. The chapter briefly reflects on the new working opportunities that had been unavailable to female violinists of a previous era. Chapter 2 aims to develop critical understanding of the process involved in virtuoso identity construction and an idiosyncratic virtuoso style. Attention is turned to concepts, such as masculinity, self-promotion, heroism, power, endurance, large tone, showmanship, and mastery, that embodied patriarchal values within socio-musical space. The intention here is to demonstrate specific challenges that *virtuose* faced at that time. The analysis of gender-based reviews of Powell, Hall, and Moodie, and the effect on their wider reception, is a key focus. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 draw directly upon the biographical data gathered. Chapters are deliberately chronological, in the hope of establishing the sequence of careers of women in my research. The idea that virtuoso identity was gendered is inherently linked to each individual biography in order to demonstrate the impact of social conditioning on particular individuals and to deliver a sense of the complexities of the life of a late nineteenth-century touring *virtuosa*. The final chapter is devoted to exploring the similarities between the lives and careers of Powell, Hall, and Moodie. Findings from previous chapters are synthesised to produce an analysis of the effects of the gender-based stereotypes that excluded these spirited pioneer violin *virtuose* from complete integration into the art of violin playing and the early recording industry. The chapter also asks what lessons can be learnt and critically reflects upon the implications for new generations of violinists, as their success seems to be disconnected from the long tradition of female violin playing. The book contains informative tables, music examples, a small discography, and a few illustrations, which give us a personal glimpse of these pioneering women.

## Notes

- 1 'Women Violinists of the Victorian Era', *The Lady's Realm*, Vol. 5 (1899), 654; cited in Paula Gillett, *Musical Women in England 1870–1914: 'Encroaching on All Man's Privileges'* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), 140.

- 2 The chronological limits have been established on stylistic grounds, with the span extending from approximately Joachim, a representative of an 'old' school of playing, to Kreisler and the emergence of 'new breed' violinists.

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Gillett, Paula, *Musical Women in England 1870–1914: 'Encroaching on All Man's Privileges'* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).