Introduction

Who in 1890s Britain could have failed to notice a surge of interest in learning and playing the instruments of the violin family, and especially the violin? Rife in metropolitan areas, the phenomenon drew considerable public attention, and notions of a "violin craze" circulated. In 1894, a journalist for the *Literary World* (1894) observed the large number of "coffin-shaped boxes one is privileged to knock one's knees against now-a-days when travelling up and down on suburban [railway] lines."[1] In another magazine, a writer claimed that not only had clothing fashions changed the look of London streets since 1880 but pedestrians were now carrying different articles of portable property, including vastly more "music portfolios and fiddle-cases."[2] He also noted that while the ranks of professional string players were growing, the center of the activity was "*en amateur.*"[3]

Although there is little doubting the veracity of these observations, the fact was that violin mania had been building for a while (since the early 1870s), extending its reach beyond large cities and embracing for the first time significant numbers of upper- and middle-class women and girls as well as working-class men and schoolchildren. By 1884, a "rage" for learning the violin was already being trumpeted,[4] while the editor of a new magazine for string players had posited that the social spread of string playing ranged "from among the most exalted in the land to the humblest dweller in the cottage."[5] Even then, interest in classical string playing in Britain was, of course, far from new, dating back to the seventeenth century. But what distinguished the post-1870 era was the dramatic growth of participation and its unprecedented breadth.

Underscored by changing social and cultural values and supported by a growing and modernizing commercial infrastructure, the invigoration of

[1] Reported in *Strings* (Apr. 1894), 56.
[2] Gerard Eliot Hodgkin, "Chamber Music and the Piano," *Strad* (Feb. 1894), 255–256, at 255. The word "fiddle" was (and still is) used by many people as an affectionate synonym for the violin in the classical tradition, and not to designate it as inherently belonging to folk music. Unless quoting such period material, I reserve "fiddle" for the folk instrument.
[3] Ibid. [4] *TSFR* (1 Dec. 1884), 399. [5] "The Reason of Our Existence," *Fiddler* (Apr. 1884), 1.

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string playing put down strong roots. The results endured beyond the Victorian era, shaping both the music profession and amateur musical life in the twentieth century, and becoming normalized within the patterns of classical (and some popular) music-making. As such, the late Victorian violin craze was unlike the short-lived fads for the mandolin and guitar of the 1890s: rather, it developed into an extensive, lasting culture of shared practices, values, knowledge, and (in some cases) expectations. Moreover, as string players came to be regularly seen and heard in entertainments on seaside piers, in restaurants, and in department stores, awareness of their music seeped into everyday life, capturing the minds of many onlookers. Different from our own times, this was a world where almost all music could only be experienced live, rendering performance enormously special; the impact of seeing and hearing sounds produced in the moment could be transfixing. By the early twentieth century, the violin family had permeated the popular imagination, too, with images of stringed instruments and their players appearing on costume jewelry and greeting cards, as well as in silent film – *The Vagabond* (1916), for instance, starred British-born Charlie Chaplin, in which he played a busker.[6]

This book revisits the culture (and subcultures) around stringed instruments in Britain during the period 1870–1930 – violin culture, as I call it – through broad historical analysis of the practical and conceptual presence of the violin family. Such rehabilitation is needed because, over time, the diverse activities of most of the newcomer string players and enthusiasts have been marginalized by or erased from the historical record, even while legacies of violin culture have reverberated into the present day. Part of the problem is that for much of the twentieth century the idea that nineteenth-century Britain was a musical desert held strong. This contention owed much to Oskar Schmitz's 1904 apothegm "Das Land ohne Musik," as well as to British musicology's response to this charge in the form of an emphasis on the native tradition of high art music and the conceptualization of an "English Musical Renaissance" of musical composition anchored around the works of Parry, Stanford, and the Vaughan Williams generation.[7] Beginning in the 1980s, however, important historical revisionism took hold, not only identifying and contextualizing rich and artistically varied veins of British composition, but also unearthing a plethora of amateur music-making and musical consumption. Far from

[6] See Ariane Todes, "Charlie Chaplin," *Strad* (Dec. 2008), 22–28. Chaplin was a keen amateur player. Being left-handed, he used an instrument that was strung and set up in reverse.

[7] For further discussion, see *WrightAB*, 21–23.

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being "without" music, Britain was shown to have been awash with it. Indeed, the extensive cultures of participatory music-making that this new scholarship unraveled – most notably the brass band world, church musics, choralism, domestic pianism, and the singalong music-hall tradition – has illuminated the social vitality of music across Britain and done much to promote understanding of the complex infrastructures that underpinned activities. Yet to date, "grass roots" violin culture, oddly hidden in plain sight, has evaded such recognition, scholars having preferred to investigate trends in the widespread take-up of instruments and musical participation that gel more readily with the received ideas about the social spread of music-making as the byproduct of an age of technological innovation and industrialization; according to this narrative, pianos and brass bands have been especially valorized.

The fact that amateur string playing itself was not new in late nineteenth-century Britain may also have contributed to scholarship's failure to recognize its significance to that era of history. Continuities with older traditions had been highlighted by earlier Victorian writers, including George Dubourg, whose anecdotal history of the (classical) violin went through several editions, the last in 1878. Besides, for much of the twentieth century, the activities of most of the newcomers to string playing would have been considered irrelevant to conventional music histories, which, if they treated performers at all, limited discussion to celebrated players from the high-serious classical arena. Many of the newcomers made music for pleasure and not always to a high standard, while others who attained advanced skills operated in the less glamorous (and poorly paid) parts of the music profession. Largely forgotten figures, they were complemented by a swathe of hobbyist instrument makers and collectors whose activities have also been largely ignored.

But now, with twenty-first-century eyes and access to newly unearthed source materials, it is possible to see how much about the stringed-instrument world in the 1870–1930 period was fresh and different: especially the nature and scale of participation and the involvement of people who, for a range of social, cultural, and economic reasons, had previously been unable to countenance taking part. Over several decades, scholars have zeroed in on individual aspects of the topic. Foremost here is the work of Robin Deverich (1987; children's violin classes), Brian Harvey (1995; a study of violin makers that draws attention to late Victorian demand for stringed instruments), Paula Gillett (2000; women string players, especially sexualized representations of them in literature and art, 1870–1914), David Golby (2004; violin pedagogy across the nineteenth century, a source study

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buttressed by contextual insights into Victorian education and amateur learning), Simon McVeigh (2010, 2018; women soloists' concert careers), and George Kennaway (2014; gendered constructions of cellos and cellists up to 1930). Building on their and others' foundational work, this book brings turn-of-the-century violin culture out of the shadows to view it as a complex whole and demonstrate its contribution to British musical life.

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How and why violin culture flourished across a wide social spectrum in Britain over the sixty-year period is this book's principal concern. Beneath sit several interrelated questions: How did the early "craze" coalesce into the panoply of shared activities and outputs that gave the culture its particular depth, breadth, and identity? What enabled string playing to challenge the piano as the ultimate domestic instrument for women and to offer fresh alternatives for participatory music-making? Why were some teaching initiatives and music exam systems so key to the culture's consolidation and perpetuation? And what was it about these fragile, wooden instruments that so captured the late Victorian and early twentieth-century imagination and created their quasi-magnetic appeal to players, listeners, makers, collectors, and others? Putting emphasis on amateur pursuits (understood throughout as activities that were not conducted to make a living), mechanisms for learning, and the structures that enabled or restricted the realization of professional ambitions, *Violin Culture* tracks the meanings that the four instruments of the violin family had in the lives of multiple populations of newcomer enthusiasts and, where possible, recovers the voices and experiences of the participants. Especially in treating the amateur domain, I am concerned less with the relative quality of the playing and more with the significance that musical activities carried.

Although the book's focus is the modern string family and the classical music tradition, the reader will find traditional fiddle, popular, and light-music styles and repertoires blended into the story, for categories were far more porous historically than they are today. Coverage tends towards the violin more than the cello, viola (doubled by violinists for much of the period), and double bass, because it was the instrument most cultivated and thus most documented. The study also establishes the role of institutions, commercial initiatives, and social forces in creating the all-important infrastructure that carried stringed instrument activities, ultimately arguing that violin culture had a systemic and lasting impact on both music-making and education and the establishment of an audience for classical music in Britain for decades to come. Relatedly, it probes the emergence of

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a distinctive body of British music for string orchestra, from Parry to early Britten, and establishes the synchronicity of violin culture and the flowering of a new, enduring repertoire.

Geographic coverage is concerned with all four countries – England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland – that had been brought together as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland under the Act of Union in 1801 and remained under British rule until the cession of the Irish Free State in 1922 (which event led, in 1927, to the revised name United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland). For continuity of discussion, and because the social, economic, and cultural ties that persisted between the Republic of Ireland and the Kingdom meant that violin culture extended into parts of Ireland, the book embraces activities there beyond 1922. I employ the terms "Britain" (as opposed to Great Britain) and "British" loosely, to invoke activities, initiatives, and ideas that were common to the entire area and to avoid using "UK" anachronistically. In Chapter 9, I distinguish between the unified political and administrative territory, on the one hand, and the "Four Nations," on the other, to determine how country-specific activities and nationhood were variously expressed in violin culture. I also outline those four countries' traditional music and fiddle playing, to highlight how those practices and ideas overlapped with the growing culture around the classical violin.[8]

Documenting a culture in which a strong amateur dimension overlaps with activities that were inherently "under the radar" presents significant historical challenges, similar to those Cyril Ehrlich confronted in his landmark history of the music profession, because source material is inevitably partial, and at times unfindable or nonexistent. This is particularly so for my study, which considers many individuals whose lives were rarely deemed worth preserving posthumously. To this end, I build not only on Ehrlich's methodologies for collective biography but also on an approach developed in my study of domestic chamber music in nineteenth-century Britain. That work pieced together scraps of indicative evidence from a wide range of historical sources (many, paradoxically, from the public record), then used R. G. Collingwood's notions of "historical imagination" and web of "imaginative construction" as a framework for interpretation.[9] *Violin Culture* proceeds in the same vein, evaluating evidence critically, and cautiously filling in the historical jigsaw puzzle so that, for all the many missing pieces of detail,

[8] "Nation," "country," "nationwide," and "national" should thus be understood as context-specific terms.

[9] Christina Bashford, "Historiography and Invisible Musics: Domestic Chamber Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *JAMS* 63, no. 2 (2010), 291–359.

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the outlines of the picture can be determined. Indeed, while amateur activities often feel invisible, by looking into traces of professional players and teachers and into the commercial and institutional enterprises that underpinned their work, one sometimes finds amateurs' endeavors emerging from the shadows.

Though it covers much terrain, a book of this size and scope – mostly written during the COVID-19 pandemic – can make no claim to exhaustiveness. Many subjects touched on are ripe for amplification. Some of the factual and interpretative claims will doubtless be modified once the power of digital humanities opens up many more sources plus practicable and novel ways of interrogating them. To borrow Stephen Banfield's summing-up of his recent study on music in the West Country, this book is "[i]n every respect . . . a provisional history, opening the door for the real work to come."[10] There is still much to learn. For, while the book uncovers many of the culture's hitherto "hidden" participants, often with first-hand testimony, the presence, activities, and experiences of others remain occluded. We know about the darker-skinned fifteen-year-old boy of mixed-race parentage from Croydon who was admitted to the Royal College of Music (RCM) as a violin student in 1890 only because he went on to become the well-known, written-about, and photographed composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, not because his racial background was documented in institutional records.[11] Who else in lists of conservatoire students and successful exam candidates were from racial minorities, and how did they fare in an overwhelmingly white violin culture? In port cities with sizeable black populations (especially after 1918), how many people of color played a stringed instrument? How did they learn and where did they make music? Given the silence of period sources on such matters, such questions seem daunting, but as Britain starts to reckon with its colonial past and as social media empowers individuals to share documents relating to their local and family histories (and as archives adjust their preservation policies), it feels reasonable to assume such material will come to light.

The book's historical scope covers a period extending roughly from 1870 to 1930. The early 1870s are an obvious starting point, because at that time the shoots of the violin "craze" were not only evident in both amateur and professional domains but also symbolized publicly by the Royal Academy

[10] Stephen Banfield, *Music in the West Country: Social and Cultural History across an English Region* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2018), xiii.

[11] His father was African. Jeffrey Green, in *Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: A Musical Life* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 23–25, charts the circumstances around Coleridge-Taylor's admission to the RCM and his later turn to studying composition. Raised by his white, far from wealthy mother, he was able to attend because a local musician covered his tuition fees.

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of Music (RAM) in London admitting its first female violin students (1872) and by the regular presence (from 1869) of Moravian-born Wilma Norman-Neruda as a violin soloist and quartet leader on the British concert scene. By the mid 1890s activities were in full bloom, as evinced by the proliferation of violin dealers, teachers, attainment examinations, professional qualifications, and new amateur string (and symphony) orchestras, as well as by a flurry of violin-magazine publishing that served to validate and dignify the emerging culture. Following retrenchment in certain areas during World War I, most of violin culture bounced back in the 1920s, albeit adapting to the shifting sands of broadcasting and the entertainment industry. Some amateur orchestras experienced difficulties recruiting players – a portent that a transitional period was beginning. A clear-cut downturn in the culture is, however, elusive, since the intensity of many activities weakened gradually, at different paces, and rarely to a point of extinction; indeed, there were later periods of rejuvenation and growth, especially among children and youth. But by 1930 the consequences of the new technologies of recorded sound for both the music profession and domestic music-making were clear to see, including in the string world, signaling a viable stopping point for this history. For many working musicians, the arrival of sound cinema (late 1929) and the general economic downturn (1929–1932) proved a watershed. In the regions, numbers of violin shops had declined, as trade directories show, and at least one London dealership, George Withers & Sons, closed its doors, citing the "passing" of the "day of the amateur musician" and lamenting, in the face of access to recorded sound, that "[f]ew people now take the pains necessary to master an instrument like the violin" (1932).[12] That the sixty years between 1870 and 1930 was the very same era of the music profession's "boom and crash" (to reference Ehrlich's words and timeframe[13]) is significant, attesting to how much the amateur and professional spheres of violin culture were bound up with one another.

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This book unfolds around a series of broad topics, all conceived as nodes for exploring how violin culture was manifest and how it became consolidated over time. After some scene-setting in Chapter 1, chapters move from matters of practicality to more abstract, conceptual topics, to reveal how violin culture was lived, experienced, and understood. Accordingly, the story shifts from questions of how, where, and why specific groups of

[12] "Changing Times in Music," *Daily Telegraph* (24 Feb. 1932).
[13] Cyril Ehrlich, "Boom and Crash for Musicians in England," *MT* (Feb. 1986), 80–83.

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people learned and played (and their experiences thereof) to the idea of the violin in the cultural imagination and how violin culture mediated or responded to national concerns. A handful of themes and broader concepts cut across the chapters: commerce, education, class, gender, professionalization, community, and private/public spheres. Because this book has a life as an ebook, I eschew the conventional summary of chapter content here, preferring to delineate the scope and objectives of each chapter at its opening.

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