Chapter Four

Woman and the Devil’s Instrument

Tartini dreamed the Devil stood one night
At the bed-foot, illumined by a beam,
Charming alike his hearing and his sight,
By fiddling a most enchanting theme.

So strongly did it haunt his waking mind,
That he with pen and ink on paper wrote
The melody and harmony combined.

Joachim picks it with such art and skill,
That hearers dream old Nick enchants them still.

Anon., The Musical World, 8 July 1865

How oft thy full & shapely bosom
Hath charm’d my ravished eye

The graceful beauty of thy smooth neck
I’ve cherish’d, with many a fond caress,
Delighting o’er & o’er to trace,
The beauteous curves that grace thy head
The acme of the sculptor’s art.

Ethelbert Ames, “My Fiddle,”
The Violin Times, February 1905

The subject of this chapter is the informal ban on women’s violin-playing in England and its demise, a process that began in the 1870s and developed so rapidly that two decades later, observers of the music scene began to take note of a “glut” of female violinists. What
was the basis of the long-standing proscription of female violinists? Why and how was it overthrown? How did society respond to the new figure of the woman violinist?

The explanation most often given for the ban was a perceived awkwardness and distortion in the player’s stance and movements: as a writer in *The Fiddler* explained during the mid-1880s—by which time the woman violinist was a well-accepted figure both in domestic music and on the concert platform—the most important source of the problem had been the depressed position of the violinist’s head and the rapid arm movements required in presto passages.¹ Such temporary distortion was acceptable for a man, but not for a girl or woman whose attractiveness was all-important and who, for this reason, was advised to play the piano, which required no facial or bodily distortion, or the guitar or harp, both of which were said to call attention to gracefully feminine movements of hand and wrist.² For reasons that will be explored in detail in the course of this chapter, I believe that the awkwardness ascribed to female violin-playing before the 1870s—a perception that, as *The Fiddler’s* reflections on a seemingly distant past would suggest, almost immediately disappeared once the ban was broken—never adequately accounted for the heavy emotional weight of the negative response evoked by the sight of the female violinist. To say this is not to deny the reality of prevailing perceptions of awkwardness, but rather to suggest that feelings of aesthetic displeasure at a tucked-in chin or too-prominent elbow seem puzzlingly insufficient to account for the intensity of the moral disapproval—*disgust* is not too strong a word—that characterized the response to the female violinist; the vehemence of that disapproval, when looked at with the benefit of over a century’s distance, seems vastly disproportionate to the ascribed cause. The charge of awkwardness was clearly a rationalization, rather than the primary reason for keeping girls and women from playing the instrument. The most potent causes of the ban lay hidden well below the surface of journalistic discourse and drawing room conversation.

A large and varied body of evidence drawn from music criticism, articles in girls’ and women’s magazines, and from poets and fiction writers points to two deeply rooted and psychologically potent reasons for the conviction that female violin-playing was inappropriate, improper, and aesthetically jarring. The first of these causes is found in the highly gendered perception of the instrument itself and in the mode of its playing; the second is found in the violin’s close association with sin, death, and the devil. This chapter will explore the background to these reasons, the factors that led to the overturning of the ban on female performance, and the appearance of the new phenomenon of the woman violinist; chapter 5 will explore the response to this change, both in the music world and in the