Chapter Five

The New Woman and Her Violin

She thought of the story of the fisherboy who listened one night on the shore to the wind-dances of the water-nixies, and afterwards wandered through the world with his violin, charming all mankind. . . .

Bertha Thomas, The Violin-Player, 1880

“A village Norman-Néruda?” whispered the guest to the host. . . . Rose’s figure was standing thrown out against the dusky blue of the tapestried walls, and from that delicate relief every curve, every grace, each tint—hair and cheek and gleaming arm gained an enchanting picture-like distinctness. . . . ”How can that man play with her and not fall in love with her?” thought Lady Charlotte, to herself, with a sigh. . . .

Mary Augusta Ward, Robert Elsmere, 1888

There is nothing more pleasing to look at, just now, than a girl playing the violin.

Walter Besant, Armorel of Lyonesse, 1890

In 1875, just three years after the Royal Academy of Music enrolled its first female violin student, Punch called its readers’ attention to this new development with a drawing by its lead artist, George du Maurier.¹ The picture’s prominently featured, two-part title, “The Fair Sextett (Accomplishments of the Rising Female Generation),” identified female violin-playing as part of the movement that sought a wider scope for women’s talents, even as the artist called attention, both in his title and in the comically juxtaposed string ensemble-cum-giant brass instrument that together comprised the “sex-tett,” to the sexual dimension of

P. Gillett, Musical Women in England, 1870–1914
© Paula Gillett 2000
Image not available for the electronic version of this book.