Viola

Wilma Neruda: Gender and Violin Performance in 19th Century England

by AJ Isaacson-Zvidzwa

"When I first came to London [in 1869], I was surprised to find that it was thought almost improper, certainly unladylike, for a woman to play on the violin…I could not understand—it seemed so absurd." — Madame Norman-Neruda, 1890

Introduction

In England in the 19th century, women were encouraged to learn instruments such as piano, harp and guitar, in order to promote good social standing and participate in domestic music making. The violin was considered a man's instrument and improper for a lady to play. Wilma Neruda didn't set out to champion women's rights, but she showed up as a violinist and let her talent and grace win her a role in the men's world. She performed as a soloist with all-male orchestras and concertized as first violinist in a string quartet with three men. Known as the "violin fairy" by Von Bülow, it was her "pure tone" and "admirable expression" on violin that made Neruda a nineteenth century household name.

Violin as a Man's Instrument

Many factors in Victorian England contributed to the idea that the violin was inappropriate for women. In countries such as Germany, it was common for women to play the violin and there was no apparent stigma attached to it. In England, however, there were more defined gender roles, and playing the violin was thought to look unladylike, leading the English to see the instrument as more suited for men.

The idea that the violin was "unladylike" is represented well in both 19th century and modern writings. Gillett says female violin playing was "inappropriate, improper, and aesthetically jarring." Karl Heinrich Heydenreich, in his book *Der Privaterzieher* of 1800 said, "The arm movements which violin players must make and the faces which they pull would do unfailing harm to femininity." In describing why the female should choose piano, harp or guitar, the problem with violin was, "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. Such temporary distortion was acceptable for a man, but not for a girl or woman whose attractiveness was all-important."

In looking at societal roles, in addition to the physical act of playing the instrument, Steblin points out, "A woman's duty is to keep quiet. Yet, the string instruments often require a quick, vigorous, powerful movement, which does not sit well with the recognized weakness of the female sex. Such hefty movements might lead to the unwelcome thought that the female player in question has a choleric temperament."

One important point to this argument is that "contemporary comments make it clear that the supposed unsuitability of the violin to the female sex was visual, a matter of sight rather than sound: something about the playing of this instrument *looked* unfeminine." However, little Wilhelmina, in addition to being a prodigy with impeccable technique and tone, was able to break the gender barriers because her playing had an "elegance of manner (in which female violinists are so often deficient)" and another review said, "The violin in the hands of a female is, in general, an awkward instrument, but la petite Wilhelmina handles it with graceful elegance."

Wilhelmina Wilma Norman-Neruda, Lady Halle

Wilhelmina (Wilma) Neruda was born in Brnu, Czech Republic sometime between 1838 and 1840. She was born into a musical family, her father a professional organist, and two of her several siblings were also child prodigies with whom she toured Europe. From a very early age, Wilhelmina wanted to play the violin. She would take her brother's violin at night and practice behind the stove in order to not disturb her siblings' sleep. Her mother was unwilling to let her play, but Wilhelmina "cried so bitterly when her violin was taken, that she allowed her [to play] without her father's knowledge." One night Wilhelmina's father came home to hear what he thought was his son playing the violin and he was "amazed at the purity and tenderness that he had. As he opened the door, it was the little one [Wilhelmina], who quickly hid the violin." Soon thereafter, her father became her first violin teacher, starting her as soon as he realized her talent on the violin. Neruda later recalled "her father had not wanted her to play the violin at first. She began by playing her brother's violin in secret, and it was only when her father discovered her passion and extraordinary talent for the instrument that he consented to give her lessons."

Little Wilhelmina had much success as a child prodigy but would be faced with more obstacles as she began her adult career. While it was considered a novelty to have a female child prodigy, it was expected that once the child reached marriageable age, she would set aside her performing career to take up wife, mother, and household duties. Another female violinist, Teresa Milanollo,

with whom Neruda was often compared, had a wonderful career as a child prodigy, but retired at the age of 29 when she married a French army officer.

After her tours as a child prodigy ended, Neruda settled in Sweden, and, in 1864, around age 25, she married Swedish composer and conductor Ludwig Norman. During this time, Norman-Neruda was unhappy. Likely due to lack of performance opportunities, Wilma wanted to leave Sweden, but her husband did not, and, in 1869 she separated from Norman. She began to travel back to London to perform around this time, making her adult debut in London with the Philharmonic Society in May of 1869 playing *Concerto in E* by H. Vieuxtemps.

In the concert review about Norman-Neruda's debut, the reviewer started off saying, "We must confess that we went to St. James's Hall strongly prejudiced against female fiddlers. It is all very well for a man to writhe and twist himself in the act of bringing expression out of catgut, but as it is the chief duty of women to be graceful, there can be no necessity, as it seemed to us, for her to adopt the most inelegant and unfeminine of instruments." However, the reviewer quickly changed his mind when Norman-Neruda began to play. He concludes the review by saying, "At the conclusion of the concerto Mdme. Neruda was twice recalled with extraordinary enthusiasm. It should be understood that we have treated the violinist with no special consideration on account of her sex. She is simply a very fine player, and we should gladly listen to her."

Henri Vieuxtemps, in London at the time of Norman-Neruda's debut, convinced her to stay and in December 1869, Norman-Neruda became the first female to lead an otherwise male string quartet in the "Monday Popular Concerts" put on by the Philharmonic Society, a quartet that lasted at least through the 1890s. The other members of the quartet were the German violinist Louis Ries on violin 2, the Austrian violinist/violist Ludwig Straus on viola, and Italian cellist Carlo Alfredo Piatti on cello.

Norman-Neruda quickly became a prominent performer in London. In March 1870, she was invited to perform at Windsor Castle for Queen Victoria, Princess Beatrice, and the Duchess of Roxburghe, alongside cellist Piatti and pianist W. G. Cusins. In London, she frequently played with well-known musicians such as violinists Henri Vieuxtemps and Joseph Joachim and pianist Clara Schumann.

She had achieved such success as a violinist that in 1876, the Duke of Edinburgh and the earls of Dudley and Hardwicke gifted her the 1709 "Ernst" Stradivarius violin, previously played by Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst, who wrote the showpieces that Norman-Neruda played as a young prodigy.

Her fame also attracted the attention of composers throughout Europe. Henri Vieuxtemps, a champion of Norman-Neruda, dedicated his 6th violin concerto to Norman-Neruda who premiered it as well. Spanish composer Pablo de Sarasate dedicated the *Spanish Dances Romanza Andaluza and Jota Navarra* to her. James Scott Skinner wrote a tune titled *Madame Neruda*. Danish composer Niels Gade dedicated his *Sonata No. 3, Op. 59* to her. And finally, Polish composer Henryk Wieniawski dedicated his *Gigue, Op. 23* to Norman-Neruda.

The Royal Academy of Music in London opened in 1822, but women were not allowed to study violin there until 1872. Once they were allowed in, a great influx of female violinists looking for performing opportunities grew. Tully Potter proposes that because of Norman-Neruda's success as a member of a string quartet, she inspired women such as Emily Shinner and the Lucas sisters to form string quartets. The difference is the other women formed all-female quartets, having a lesser status, whereas Norman-Neruda played in a highly praised, professional string quartet, as the only female.

In this era, women were not allowed to play in orchestras with the men. An 1818 review said, "We can imagine no solid reason against the violin as an instrument for females, except the awkwardness attending the co-mixture in an orchestra." To counter this, at least two all-female orchestras were established in England, though very little is written about them. The earliest one, formed in 1886 by Rosabel Watson, was the Aeolian Ladies' Orchestra, a professional orchestra formed of musicians who were currently in, or graduated from the Royal Academy of Music, Royal Conservatory of Music and the Guildhall School of Music. The other ensemble, an amateur orchestra, was the English Ladies' Orchestral Society, boasting over a hundred members. It is notable that in an age when women were forming all female orchestras and female string quartets, Norman-Neruda was playing violin as a woman in a man's world.

When Norman-Neruda began her career in London, Sir Charles Halle, renowned pianist and conductor, and founder of the Halle Orchestra, helped launch her chamber music career. Nineteen years Wilma's senior, they frequently played sonatas in recitals at the St. James's Hall. It is unclear when their relationship became romantic, but Norman-Neruda was Catholic, so she remained married, but separated from her first husband until his death in 1885. Three years later, Norman-Neruda married Sir Charles Halle. From then on, Norman-Neruda became known as "Lady Halle." Once married, the couple toured internationally, including in Australia and South Africa. In 1895, shortly after their return from South Africa, Sir Charles passed away. After his death, Wilma continued to tour, including travels to Canada and the United States.

In 1900, Lady Halle announced her retirement from performing. In her retirement she accepted a teaching position at the Stern Konservatorium in Berlin, a position she held until her death in 1911.

Norman-Neruda as a Performer

Norman-Neruda was extremely active as a performer. In 1871 in particular, she was mentioned in 635 (at least!) British newspaper articles. In January alone she played 17 concerts, with 23 different works and nine recitals that didn't list repertoire. Her repertoire included concertos, string quartets, sonatas for piano and violin, and other chamber music ensembles.

In her concert advertisements and reviews, there was a split in how Norman-Neruda's gender was addressed. Sometimes, her gender afforded her special attention. One advertisement referred to her as the "wonderful and celebrated Lady Violinist," while no comparable description was provided for Charles Halle, her duet partner in recital. Other times, she was treated as an equal to the male performers. One review states, "With the sole exception of Joachim, we know of no violinist capable of surpassing Madame Neruda" with no reference to her being a "lady violinist." Fifteen days earlier, however, another review from the same time states, "Madame Norman-Neruda has also become justly famous as a lady violinist." That review goes on to justify Neruda's position among the men, but still categorizes her because of her gender.

Conclusion

From her London debut in 1849 to her

death in 1911, there are over 12,000 references to Norman-Neruda in British newspapers, including performance announcements and concert reviews. The articles make it clear that Norman-Neruda was a well-respected, sought-after soloist and chamber musician in England and around the world. It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly allowed Neruda to break gender barriers and become such a prominent figure in the Victorian England music scene. Something about the way she played made the violin look ladylike. She built on the history of female violin prodigies, but what made Norman-Neruda unique was that she continued to perform and have a career as an adult. The connections she made as a child, including Henri Vieuxtemps and Sir Charles Halle, helped her launch into the performing scene in London.

Neruda's fame was "unmatched by any other woman violinist [in London]... It is a measure of her achievement that she transcended discussion in gender terms at all." She became a household name as a violinist, not merely a "female violinist." In as early as 1869, a concert reviewer said, "Madame Norman-Neruda, is a violinist of such extraordinary talent as to require no qualification in our remarks on account of her sex."

In an age where women were deterred from playing the violin, the grace with which Neruda played earned her a place among men in the concert halls of 19th century London. Reviews included words such as "unspoilt, pure, and musical," "much artistic feeling," produced with "the highest degree: tone, execution, enthusiasm," or "superb tone and unerring accuracy have never been more strikingly displayed" to describe the musicianship of Neruda. As a soloist with an orchestra, leader of a string quartet, or playing duets with Sir Charles, her performances were met with the "most enthusiastic applause."

While there were other talented female violinists in this age, it is interesting that Neruda rose to such levels of fame in her time. From reviews, it is clear Neruda had great talent as well as grace from an early age, but is it that alone that allowed her to have such success? Often compared with the famous violinist Joseph Joachim, Neruda had fame unparalleled with any woman of the time, but she has fallen into obscurity in modern times, unlike male violinists like Joachim or Vieuxtemps. Is it because of her gender? Is it because she lacks the connection to a prominent composer? Is there another reason? Although her legend has since faded away, Wilma Neruda broke the ground for generations of female violinists to follow.

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