

Making the Violin Fashionable: Gender and Virtuosity in the Life of Camilla Urso

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Abstract

In the late nineteenth century, the violinist Camilla Urso (1840-1902) was widely recognized as the pre-eminent female violinist in the United States. As a nationally famous celebrity, Urso became a pedagogue and role model to subsequent generations of female violinists. Both the wide-ranging geographic spread of Urso's career and her direct advocacy for women violinists played a pivotal role in changing cultural ideals of violin performance from a militant and masculine bravura tradition into a fashionable pursuit for young women. A classmate of Henryk Wieniawski (1835-1880) and a concert rival of the Norwegian virtuoso Ole Bull (1810-1880), Urso's career rested on the shoulders of the nineteenth century bravura tradition. In her own playing, Urso merged virtuosic works with a feminine sensitivity creating a celebrity persona of the "The Queen of the Violin," while also redefining gender norms of violin performance for women. First, this paper will examine Urso's celebrity through two contrasting concerts, one in 1852 and the other in 1885, that illustrate the development of her repertoire and shed light on the world on the nineteenth century concert artist. Secondly, this paper will explore Urso's role as a pedagogue through her professorship at the National Conservatory of Music, her connection to the New York Women's String Orchestra, and her own published writings. Through her performance and teaching, Urso profoundly changed the possibilities for women violinists at the turn of the twentieth century.

1 INTRODUCTION

Urso was born in Nantes, France in 1840 to Salvator and Emilie Urso*. Both of Urso's parents were musicians; her father was a flutist in the theater orchestra and an organist in the local church while her mother was a well-respected singer. Thus, Urso was a part of what Nancy Reich has called the "Musician-Artist Class": a nineteenth century European social class composed of professional musical families². Both Urso's professional musical career and choice of the violin as an instrument would have been unthinkable in practically any other social circumstance. After becoming one of the first women to graduate from the Paris Conservatoire, in 1852, Urso came to the United States for a concert tour and subsequently remained in the United States for fifty years. During her fifty-year career, Urso performed in forty-five states, and at least eight countries. Some highlights of her career include: a five-day musical festival in benefit of the San Francisco Mercantile Library Association in 1870; the American premiere of

the Joseph Joachim and Edward Lassen violin concertos in 1891 and 1893, respectively; as well as the creation of her own touring concert company that ran from 1873 to 1897. Urso's repertoire contained over a hundred pieces, including some of the most difficult virtuoso works ever written for the violin.

In the nineteenth century, the violin was a male dominated instrument, supported by a robust tradition of virile virtuosity. Male critics consistently objected to the physicality of female violin performance; as the scholar Tatiana Goldberg notes, the "twisted upper torso, 'strange' head position, the clamping down of the chin, unattractive rapid arm movements and the standing position of the performer, facing the public, were all considered inherently unfeminine"³. Objections to women's physical performance were grounded in gendered ideals of the violin; the violin itself was considered feminine, therefore, male performers were considered a complimentary mate to the female violin. This tradition of viewing the violin itself as feminine both encouraged a virtuoso tradition of masculine and militant performances while enforcing the discordance between binary gender norms and women who attempted to play the violin. In other words, it was heterosexually acceptable for men to play a female-gendered instrument

*Many nineteenth century sources, as well as earlier scholarship, give Urso's year of birth as 1842. However, Johanna Selleck discovered Urso's birth certificate which lists her year of birth as 1840. For further discussion see "Camilla Urso: A Visiting Virtuoso Brings Music to the People," by Johanna Selleck¹.

but was considered inappropriately sexual for women to do so⁴.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a small number of women had become successful professional violinists; however, generally they gained notoriety as child prodigies and were fetishized as a singular exception to the norm. Furthermore, after gaining acclaim as a *wunderkind*, their careers often ended upon their marriage. At the start of Urso's career in the 1840s, she only had three female violinist contemporaries: the sister violinists, Teresa and Maria Milanollo (b. 1827, and 1830) and Wilma Norman Neruda (b. 1838), all three of whom rose to international acclaim in Europe as child prodigies[†].

2 URSO AND HER REPERTOIRE: EARLY YEARS

Initially Camilla Urso's career followed a similar trajectory to that of the girl *wunderkind*, however, the longevity of Urso's career and the complexity of her repertoire was unheard of for a mid-nineteenth century female violinist. Solo recitals were rare in the nineteenth century, instead programs consisted of a variety of songs, opera arias, and instrumental showpieces. For example, when Urso debuted at New York's Metropolitan Hall on September 30, 1852, she only performed three selections: Violin Concerto No. 24 in B minor by Viotti, *Souvenirs de Bellini* by Alexandre Artot, and Air Varie No. 6 by Charles August de Bériot. The other pieces on the program included Beethoven's *Egmont Overture*, Rossini's *Overture to Othello*, as well as the song "Love's Dream" by Rosner, and "The Nymph's Echo melody with Oboe" sung by Madame Oscar Comettant. This concert format is similar to almost all mid-nineteenth century American classical music concerts, and exemplative of the majority of Urso's performances.

Urso's early repertoire primarily consisted of virtuoso theme and variation works meant to showcase the technical prowess of the performer. One such example, exemplative of Urso's repertoire from this period, is *Souvenir de Bellini* by Alexander Artot. Composed in 1841, *Souvenir de Bellini* is a theme and variation set based off the operatic compositions of Vincenzo Bellini (1801-1850). Beginning with a virtuosic introduction consisting of three large runs, *Souvenir de Bellini* is dramatic, operatic, and incredibly virtuosic throughout. Artot's *Souvenir de Bellini* uses a variety of advanced

violin techniques including fast arpeggios, up-bow staccato, frequent octaves, thirds, and sixths, as well as fast spiccato double-stops. The theme and variation format clearly delineates sections for the listener and allows the performer a chance to show off their facility with a specific technique in each section.

From her arrival in New York City in September 1852 to Urso's marriage three and half years later in June of 1856, Urso's repertoire remained primarily confined to virtuosic showpieces. As the only string player in her traveling concert troupe, Urso did not play chamber music, and with very few exceptions did not have the opportunity to play large concertos with an orchestra because most American orchestral institutions were either nonexistent or in their infancy prior to the Civil War. Urso did perform the *Fantasia on Themes from Lucrezia Borgio* by Philippe Sainton with the New York Philharmonic conducted by Theodore Eisfelt on January 20, 1855; however, such appearances were the exception rather than the rule for Urso.

3 URSO AND HER REPERTOIRE: LATER YEARS

Over the course of her career, Urso's repertoire widened in scope. In her later career, Urso included more sophisticated concert transcriptions, violin concertos, and sonata excerpts in addition to her standard virtuosic showpieces. While on tour with the Camilla Urso Concert Company, Urso developed a standard program model that included two programmed works, and a slurry of her standard encores. Urso's programmed works tended to be larger virtuoso pieces such as *The Carnival of Venice* by Paganini, while her encores tended to be arrangements of popular songs such as "The Last Rose of Summer" or piano works such as Schuman's *Träumerei*. Occasionally she included other concert pieces such as the Capriccio by Niels Gade, or sonata excerpts such as the Solo Violin Sonata by Friedrich Wilhelm Rust. Touring with a concert company had a practical benefit of reducing the amount of pieces Urso had to learn for each season.

Throughout her career, Urso gave less than five recitals that come close to the modern definition of a solo recital. Urso's solo recital programs are indicative of both the development and breadth of her repertoire. On September 7, 1885, Urso gave a recital with the pianist August Sauret at the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Urso's program included the second and third movements of the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto, two Chopin transcriptions by Urso herself, *The Devil's Trill Sonata* by Tartini, *The Carnival of Venice* by Ernst, *Capriccio-Valse* by Wieniawski, selections from Bach's Partita No. 3 in E Major, a transcription of Schuman's *Träumerei*, as well as excerpts from Violin Sonata No. 2, Op. 78 by Joachim

[†] After the two sisters became concert sensations in France, Maria Milanollo died at age sixteen in 1848 of whooping cough. Her elder sister, Teresa Milanollo lived until 1904 and continued to perform after her sister's death, even composing several pieces for violin in her later years⁵. Wilma Norman Neruda, otherwise known as Lady Halle, was an Austrian violinist who rose to prominence in Europe. Affectionately referred to as "the violin fairy," Neruda was admired by many prominent violin virtuosos including both Vieuxtemps and Joachim⁶.

Raff, and finally *The Witches Dance* by Paganini. Also on the program were three unspecified piano solos performed by Auguste Sauret. Urso's program from 1885 is both large and difficult; in it, she blends difficult virtuoso works by Paganini and Ernst with excerpts from a standard violin concerto, and a variety of short concert transcriptions, providing a unique picture of the breadth and power of Urso at the height of her career.

Urso's two virtuoso works, the *Carnival of Venice* by Ernst, and *Paganini's Witches Dance*, were staples Urso used to impress audience members with virtuosic spectacle. Both are also exceedingly difficult and make use of a large variety of advanced violin techniques within a theme and variation format. Ernst's *Carnival of Venice* includes fast arpeggios, up-bow staccati, and whole passages in octaves; it also includes more difficult techniques such as left-hand pizzicato, and artificial harmonic double-stops. In one passage, as illustrated in figure 1, the performer is required to play the theme in the upper voice while simultaneously plucking an accompaniment with the left hand on the G string.



Figure 1. Ernst, *Carnival of Venice*. The bottom line is played pizzicato with the left-hand at the same time as the top line.

In a review of her performance, *The Star Tribune* commented, Urso's "fingers seemed to be playing tricks with the double harmonics but her grave face with its closed eyes denied the imputation. She seemed to be doing it in her sleep"⁶. The prevalence of difficult virtuoso works on Urso's recitals emphasizes her skill on the violin. Many modern violinists shy away from these types of compositions due to their sheer difficulty, yet Urso "seemed to be doing it in her sleep."

In addition to her virtuosic works, Urso also included the last two movements of the Mendelssohn violin concerto in her recital. In contrast with modern violinists who frequently perform concertos, Urso rarely performed concertos; but when she did, the Mendelssohn violin concerto appeared often on her programs though often in an abbreviated form. With the exception of the Beethoven violin concerto, the Mendelssohn concerto is the only concerto Urso performed more than two or three times. Though flashy, the Mendelssohn concerto is equally melodic and much easier than the later repertoire on this program. Clearly, Urso impressed her audience with her performance. One reviewer commented, "These brilliant and difficult passages are such as to test the highest skill and Madame Urso made good her claim by the perfect fluency with which they were

rendered with no note slighted and with apparently no effort to herself"⁶. Indeed, Urso's performance probably took minimal effort considering how frequently she had performed this work.

The third main category on Urso's 1885 Minneapolis recital was concert transcriptions and encores. Urso performed around fifteen of her own concert transcriptions as encores throughout her career. Most of Urso's transcriptions are arrangements of classical piano works by Chopin and Schuman or arrangements of popular songs by composers such as Louis Gottschalk, and Stephen Foster. On this particular recital Urso performed her own arrangements of Schuman's *Traumerei*, and Chopin, Nocturne in D flat Major, Op. 27, as well as one of the Op. 64 Waltzes by Chopin. The practice of concert transcriptions was commonplace among nineteenth century performers, however Urso herself minimized her role as an arranger in a letter to Lydia Avery Coonley Ward in 1893, writing, "Aside a few soli of no importance. I have only arrangements or more properly transcriptions from works of Schubert, Chopin, Mendelssohn"⁷. All in all, this is a hefty program that many modern violinists would be reluctant to undertake. Even though Urso performed on the lyceum and vaudeville circuit, her artistic merit should not be underestimated.

4 THE GIRL VIRTUOSO: CAMILLA URSO'S EARLY AMERICAN CAREER

When Urso arrived in New York in early September of 1852, at the age of twelve, with her father and Aunt Caroline, she was following a popular tradition of European virtuosos embarking on American concert tours. Only two years earlier, the Swedish soprano, Jenny Lind, had entranced American audiences as she toured under the management of P.T. Barnum, while the violinists Henri Vieuxtemps, Ole Bull, and Charles August de Beriot all made concert tours of the United States in the mid nineteenth-century. Urso's nineteenth-century biographer, Charles Barnard, claims an unidentified American concert promoter sought out Urso and offered her a three-year touring contract accompanied with the promise of riches: "He would pay Mademoiselle Urso the sum of thirty thousand francs the first year, sixty thousand francs the second year and one hundred thousand francs the third year. Traveling and hotel expenses for three people were to be paid and altogether it was a flattering offer"⁸. Urso's talent served as a source of income for her family, and such a lucrative offer, especially for a girl violinist with relatively limited prospects, was difficult to pass up.

Newspapers began advertising Urso's first appearance almost a month before the concert. *The New York Times* heralded the arrival of the "juvenile violinist, aged 11 years, of the Musical Conservatory of Paris," as early as September 10⁹. In addition to Urso, her promoter

also engaged the pianist Oscar Comettant, his wife Mrs. Comettant, a singer, and Mr. Feitlinger, a tenor for her debut concert¹⁰. The concert was conducted by Theodore Eisfeldt and accompanied by a “grand orchestra.” The members and size of the orchestra are not known, though it probably numbered no more than two dozen musicians.

Very few, if any, other female violinists had performed in America before 1852; therefore, Urso was an unusual sight. With equal parts captivation and wonder, *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, the pre-eminent classical music journal of the time in America, recorded that, on account of Urso’s small size, “during her performance she stands on a small moveable platform three or four foot square”¹¹. Newspaper reviews were fascinated with the paradox between Urso’s perceived delicate femininity and intense virtuosity. *Dwight’s Journal of Music* again commented: “The little maiden is plain, with strong arms and hands enlarged by practice of her instrument; yet her appearance is most interesting; a face full of intellectual and sedate expression, a large forehead wearing a pale cast of thought”¹². At the same time the journal labeled her New York debut “one of the most beautiful and touching experiences of our whole musical life,” praising “the firm and graceful bowing, the rich pure refined tone, the light and shade, the easy control of the arpeggio, staccato, and double-stops” in Urso’s performance of Artot’s *Souvenir de Bellini*¹². Early captivation with Urso from the musical critics, and concert-going public laid a foundation for her later successes; however, Urso’s early career was defined by her identity as a child prodigy and both her repertoire and concert reach remained relatively limited.

5 URSO ON THE LYCEUM CIRCUIT: THE MATURE ARTIST GIVES A SOLO RECITAL

The majority of Urso’s career was spent on the lyceum concert circuit, and it was this institution that was crucial to the development of her celebrity. After the spending the Civil War in Nashville, Urso busily re-established her place on the musical scene in Boston and New York with a renewed fervor in the 1860s and 1870s. Beginning with the formation of the Camilla Urso Concert Company, a division of the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, in 1873 Urso embarked on yearly tours that took her everywhere from California to Vermont to Australia.

Though the members of her company changed each season, the instrumental makeup of her company remained relatively stable. Besides Urso, her husband, and manager, Frederic Luere, the Camilla Urso Concert Company consisted of a male pianist, several singers, and occasionally a dramatic reader or elocutionist. The members of her company changed over time from the soprano Clara Kathleen Rogers in 1874 to the elocu-

tionist Helen Hall in 1901 among scores of other artists. The lyceum concert circuit was a vast network of individual lyceum courses located across the east and middle-west of the United States. Originally designed as a vehicle for public lecturers, the introduction of musical acts in the 1870s, as Sara Lampert explains in the book *Cosmopolitan Lyceum: Lecture Culture and the Globe in Nineteenth Century America*, “expanded the market for foreign artists in America while creating new avenues for American musicians to develop regional and national touring careers”¹³.

In the summer and fall of 1885, Urso gave several recitals with the pianist Auguste Sauret throughout the Midwest. Urso’s concert on September 7, 1885, in Minneapolis, is an excellent example of Urso in performance at the height of her celebrity. A concert review in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, from Urso’s September 7, 1885 recital, begins with a sense of awe at the prospect of an Urso concert, “though the night was dark and rainy, the lecture room of Westminster church was filled by an audience mostly composed of music lovers who were not to be drawn away from this treat”¹⁴. Likely traveling all day, the artist did not appear on the stage until 8:30pm. Reviews in both the *Star Tribune* and the *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* paint a vivid picture of Urso in performance:

Madame Urso stands about five feet high in her little white slippers and if she were standing on a pair of scales would probably tip them at 175 or 180 pounds. She wore a roseleaf pink trained robe, last evening, and an expression of profound gravity. The robe was low necked and sleeveless and lighted up with iridescent beads but nothing lightened up the facial expressions for one fleeting moment. Madame Urso made a slight formal bow, moved the diamond pendant on her necklace under her left ear placed her violin under her fair, pretty chin and deliberately closed her eyes against the audience¹⁴.

The “expression of profound gravity” on Urso’s face described by this reviewer positions Urso as a stoic and statuesque performer. Despite her virtuosic repertoire, Urso was not a flashy or fiery player. In fact, Urso’s acceptance as a female violinist was most likely tied to her grave style of performance that did not overtly challenge expected gender norms.

In recital, the height of Urso’s power and acclaim are evident. In 1885, Urso was at the highpoint of her career. At forty-two years of age, Urso had significant experience as a performer while still being well received by concert audiences and not yet plagued by a later injury to her right wrist that would hamper her playing. The *Minneapolis Daily Tribune* commented on the “varied

and remarkable powers of the artist," while also recognizing the unique format of the solo recital: "A program giving the star so large a space is undoubtedly to the popular taste and is certainly more satisfactory than a two-thirds dilution in second or third class support"¹⁵. Very few musicians in the late nineteenth century were famous enough to sell out a solo recital. In this regard Urso was a notable exception. The only other American female violinist able to carry a solo recital during this period was Maud Powell (1867-1920), Urso's significantly younger contemporary.



Figure 2. Camilla Urso in 1881. Courtesy of the Camilla Urso Collection, University of South Carolina Special Collections and Archives.

6 THE DEVELOPMENT OF CELEBRITY

Although Urso is not a household name today, during her lifetime she was a celebrity. Nineteenth-century publications and newspapers frequently used Urso as a comparative standard in performance reviews, especially towards younger female violinists*. Testaments to Urso's celebrity include her appearance in serialized novels such as *His Fleeting Ideal* published in 1892, and the issuing of a commemorative "Camilla Urso Mantel Clock" by the E.M. Welch company in the early twentieth century. In addition "the Camilla Urso Stakes" an annual horse race, still occurring to this day, in San Francisco was named after her¹⁶. To nineteenth-century music critics as well as young female violinists, Urso be-

*For example, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported on June 28, 1869: "Miss Toedt's playing, while it lacks perhaps firmness and precision of Camilla Urso, who is older by many years, has all her feeling and expression, if not more."

came the token female violinist in America, and, if not the only, certainly the most prominent model of a highly competent professional female violinist at the turn of the Twentieth-century. The prominence of Urso's reputation and high stature within the cultural world was part and parcel to Urso's later efforts to advocate for female violinists. Without an established reputation, Urso's longstanding pedagogical reach would have been impossible.

7 ADVOCATION FOR FEMALE VIOLINISTS

As a result of her celebrity status, Urso became one of the leading violin pedagogues in America at the turn of the century. Without the existence of Urso's personal papers and more extensive correspondence, it is difficult to ascertain the specificities of Urso's pedagogical methods[†]. However, some notable pedagogical examples exist. In 1893, Urso gave a speech at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago during the Women's Musical Congress which ran from July 4-6, 1893. In Urso's speech "Women and the Violin" she advocates for economic and professional equality for women orchestral musicians[‡]. In her speech, Urso argues for the acceptance of women violinists. Urso argued that the feminine nature of the violin actually enhances the femininity of women who choose to play it: "a pretty woman, handsomely attired... is more picturesque and possesses more attraction than the male performer"⁷. Urso's endorsement of female violin performance is an rejection of the traditional male performance tradition.

As a violinist who had personal experience with institutional discrimination, she used her speech to advocate for women violinists while also speaking out against institutional barriers for women violinists. Not only did contemporary gender ideals discourage women from seeking careers outside the home, until 1904 women were barred from orchestral unions and thus were unable to secure a steady paying orchestral job[§]. In her

[†]Urso's great granddaughter, Emily Rotsch, told me that most of Urso's papers were likely given to her early biographer Charles Barnard and the existence of her other papers is unknown at this time. Of Urso's five children, only her three daughters, Emily Taylor (1857-1941), Caroline Taylor (1860-1908), and Camille Luere Roe (later Dewey) (1864-1956), were still alive at the time of her death in 1902¹⁷.

[‡]The manuscript of Urso's speech was originally discovered by Susan Kagan, who published a full copy of the text in her article "Camilla Urso: A 19th Century Violinist's View" published in the Spring 1977 issue of *Signs*. Kagan informed me through email that she sold the manuscript to the music auction firm J J Lubrano in 2012. The current location of the manuscript is unknown¹⁸. The full text appears in "Camilla Urso: a 19th Century Violinist's View," by Susan Kagan¹⁹. The same speech also appears in "Women in Music: An Anthology of Primary Source Readings," by Carol Neuls Bates²⁰. Interestingly, a letter to Lydia Avery Coonley Ward suggests Urso was originally solicited to submit one of her own compositions for performance, but most likely decided to speak instead due to a cycling accident in September 1892 which severely hampered her playing⁷.

[§]Many professional women violinists emerged in the latter half

speech, Urso acknowledged the struggles women violinists face, stating “few can become virtuosi and many really good players must stay at home”³. In spite of institutional discrimination, Urso firmly believed in the capabilities of female violinists and stressed that in her speech. In her speech she asserted: “women as a rule play better in tune than men” and “they play with greater expression, certainly, than the average orchestral musician”¹⁹. When Urso employed women violinists to reinforce her orchestra, “they were quick to understand, prompt at rehearsals, obedient and attentive to the conductors remarks and not inclined to sneak away under a pretext... if the rehearsal was a trifle long”¹⁹.

8 URSO'S PROFESSORSHIP AT THE NATIONAL CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC

Urso's 1893 speech was the fruit of her own checkered career as a pedagogue which began with her association with the National Conservatory of Music. After extensive concertizing around the world, Urso made a more permanent relocation to New York City in 1890 beginning the most intensive focus on pedagogy in her life thus far. Paramount to her residence in New York from 1890-1893 was Urso's professorship at the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. Due to very limited surviving records, Urso's affiliation with the National Conservatory has never been explored in published material. A notice in the *Brooklyn Eagle* from November 23rd, 1890 announced “Camilla Urso has joined the staff of the National Conservatory of Music in New York as professor of violin playing”^{22,23}. Urso's fame and status as a foreign artist created a compelling advertisement for the newly established National Conservatory and this announcement was reprinted widely in newspapers and music periodicals throughout the U.S. Based on newspaper records, it seems likely that Urso only taught at the National Conservatory during the academic years of 1890-91, 1891-92, and 1892-93; Urso left for an extended tour of Australia in 1893 and did not return to New York until the fall of 1895, at which point she was no longer associated with the school.

Originally founded as the School of American Opera in 1885 by Jeannette Thurber, the National Conservatory primarily provided vocal instruction, therefore the amount of violin students enrolled was comparatively small. The head of the string department, and long-standing violin professor, Leopold Lichtenburg (1861-1935) does not appear in the National Conservatory account books until 1888 implying the National Conservatory did not hire any orchestral faculty until several

of the nineteenth century yet most of them made careers as orchestral soloists, recitalists, and private teachers. Despite legal permission, in practice many women were barred from orchestral careers until well into the twentieth century^{21,3}.

years after the school's founding[‡]. To further emphasize the disparity in enrollment between instrumental and vocal departments, of the fifty-three pupils from Brooklyn mentioned in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1892, only three are violinists²⁵. Therefore, it seems likely that Urso only taught a handful of students at the National Conservatory.

Urso's professorship at the National Conservatory was unusual because, while there were female voice professors, Urso was the only female professor among the orchestral faculty, emphasizing the institutional barriers women faced in professional pedagogical environments. Even though amateur music teaching was dominated by women in the late nineteenth-century, teaching at a professional conservatory, even one as new and progressive as the National Conservatory, presented obstacles for women^{††}.

While teaching at the National Conservatory, Urso felt that American students were not at an appropriate technical level. In a somewhat satirical article published on May 26, 1892, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that “during the daytime Camilla Urso, Leopold Lichtenberg, Victor Herbert, Otto Oesterle, and their associates disposed of about forty ambitious youth of both sexes who want to play orchestral instruments of one sort and another”²⁶. This same sentiment is also echoed in an article written by Urso herself entitled “On the Study of the Violin: Pertinent Advice From the Pen of One Well Qualified to Give it” published in the *Musical Record* in 1898. Despite the increasing prevalence of American violin students, Urso writes that most of her violin students at the National Conservatory were ill prepared and had received an insufficient musical education:

When I belonged to the faculty of the national Conservatory of Music of America, at one of the yearly examinations... out of the fifty-four pupils who competed for a mission to enter these classes only two were accepted. The applicants had all studied for several years and came from all parts of the United States. The two admitted were the only ones who filled satisfactorily the requirements exacted, simple enough as the requirements were. All that was asked of them was to play acceptably the elementary exercises²⁷.

In another article discussing student violinists, Urso reveals, with veiled contempt, how none of the applicants to the National Conservatory had good quality

[‡]The account book chronicles the school's finances from December of 1885 to January of 1891 and does not mention Urso²⁴.

^{††}Outside of the National Conservatory, Urso also taught a number of private students during her 1890-93 residence in New York. It is possible to trace some of Urso's pupils in New York through newspaper records including Bertie Webb, Cecilia Bradford, and Eleanor Hooper (later Coryell).

instruments⁸. Urso's bitter attitude may suggest Urso left the National Conservatory out of dissatisfaction, however, other factors, including her significant wrist injury in September 1892, also influenced her break with the institution after only three years⁹.

9 URSO AND NEW YORK WOMEN'S STRING ORCHESTRA

Despite leaving the National Conservatory, Urso remained involved in the pedagogical world, including becoming the honorary president of the New York Women's String Orchestra. Carl Lachmund founded the New York Women's String Orchestra in 1896, making it one of the earliest "lady orchestras" in the United States³⁰. Urso became involved with the orchestra during its inaugural season and appeared as a soloist with the orchestra on at least one occasion before her death in 1902¹¹. In a letter to the orchestra's director, Carl Lachmund, dated January 24, 1896 Urso accepted Lachmund's offer to be the honorary president of the orchestra, stating "I shall be much pleased to see such an excellent thing established in New York and be prosperous. Indeed, there is so much excellent talent among women of the kind required that need but an opportunity to be heard, that I have no doubt—of the society's success. I accept with pleasure your offer"³². Of course, the position of "honorary president" was nominal in nature; Urso was not involved in the running of the orchestra, and her "honorary presidency" was mostly used to garner publicity for concerts. In fact, business documents from the Carl Lachmund collection at the New York Public Library show Urso was not listed on any official orchestra documents and was not in attendance at any concerts during their first season³².

The New York Women's String Orchestra was comprised of professional musicians, but did not give public concerts; instead, their annual season of four concerts was available to members who paid a yearly fee of \$10. Outside of their subscription concerts, the orchestra also frequently gave charity concerts³³. An article in the

⁸"It is remarkable how many who have not even the plea of poverty buy instruments of the cheapest kind. These thoughts passed through my mind when I listened a few weeks ago to fifty-four applicants for the violin classes of the National Conservatory of Music. Hardly one had an instrument that could be called passable. This is a serious mistake"²⁸.

⁹Urso was knocked down by a bicyclist in September 1892, badly injuring her right arm. According to some accounts, Urso's performing was never the same again after this injury. One article from 1895 claimed this accident "resulted in the crippling of her hand for all other purposes save for handling her bow" and mentioned that three years after the accident "she is unable to sew with it, and prefers, at present, her left hand in shaking hands"²⁹.

¹¹A notice in the *Musical Courier* from April 20, 1898 reported "The third concert of the Women's String Orchestra Society of which Carl V. Lachmund is conductor, will take place April 21 in Mendelssohn Hall. The soloists will be Mme. Camilla Urso, violinist, and honorary president of the society"³¹.

Musical Courier noted the orchestra had three-hundred annual subscribers³¹.

Nonetheless, Urso used the New York Women's String Orchestra as a way to champion the successes and capabilities of female orchestral musicians. In a letter written by Urso, reprinted in the *Musical Courier* dated February 25, 1898, Urso stated, "The excellent shading and time, skillful technic, perfect intonation and graceful style of this organization goes far to confirm my demands of years ago for women's admission as violinists to theatrical and other orchestras as a means of livelihood. . . Let my sisters agitate this question and assert their rights"³⁴. To those who doubted women's capabilities as orchestral musicians, Urso brandished the Women's String Orchestra as an example of a venue in which women were already successful orchestral musicians.

Letters between Urso and Lachmund also suggest Urso received pupils from the orchestra. In one letter she states, "It might be possible that some of the girls would like coaching for solo work and I promised to let them know if I had every time for such - and will call it a kindness if you will tell them of my presence here"³⁴. In yet another letter she writes "you will announce to the orchestra that I am receiving pupils"³⁴. Urso's role within Lachmund's orchestra provided Urso with a means to acquire pupils and extend her influence as a pedagogue.

10 URSO AND HER OWN VALUABLE IDEAS FOR PUPILS

Despite her advocacy, Urso's own writings about female violinists are firmly grounded in cynicism. Urso concluded her article "Valuable Ideas for Pupils" published in the January 1892 issue of *Etude Magazine* with a blunt piece of advice: "You see that my life is made up of hard work, and under the circumstances I should say to young girls who are thinking of becoming professional violinists, 'Don't.' Solo playing and teaching are all that are open to women violinists now-a-days"³⁵. This advice contrasts sharply with Urso's efforts to champion women violinists, readily acknowledging that, despite her success and fame, female violinists faced discrimination and less reliable sources of income, a fact Urso knew well, since from 1898-1901, despite her successful career, Urso appeared in vaudeville shows for monetary reasons.

11 CONCLUSION

Given the available evidence, did Camilla Urso really do, as Edith Lynwood Win proclaimed in 1908, "more in America to cause girls to enter the field of violin playing than anyone else has done"³⁶? It is unlikely that Urso was the single defining factor in changing societal

attitudes towards women violinists. However, many accounts of women violinists at the turn of the century named Urso as their primary inspiration. The violinist, Lucille Eldridge-Shafer fondly recalled her first meeting with Urso, stating “she was the first lady violinist worthy of name that I heard and how her playing did enrapture me”³⁷. An admirer recalled in *Demorset’s Family Magazine* “I think my first impressions of Camilla Urso as played ten years ago with the old Philharmonic Orchestra in the Boston Theatre are shared by many of the girl violinists of today whose first aspirations were aroused by her exquisite renderings of the Mendelssohn concerto”³⁸.

Surely, we can see Urso as a figure of change. When Urso arrived in New York in 1852, a female violinist was a rare spectacle, yet by 1900 women violinists had become a more commonplace occurrence, if not a fashionable pursuit for young women. In 1901, attitudes toward women violinists had changed to such an extent that the music critic George Lehman proclaimed “society’s attitude toward the woman violinist is so completely metamorphosed that a young girl, possessed of neither wealth nor great physical or mental charms, but capable of playing the violin tolerably well, is strongly fortified for social and even material success”³⁹. The many American violinists who rose to prominence in the 1880s and beyond including Maud Powell, Marion Osgood, Geraldine Morgan, Nettie Carpenter, Arma Senkra (Harkness), Teresina Tua, Olive Mead, Lillian Shattuck, and Marie Soldat Roeger all rest on the shoulders of Camilla Urso. In her widespread concerts and private teaching, Urso demonstrated that women were very capable of playing the violin and subsequently inspired a generation of female musicians.

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13 EDITOR’S NOTES

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