

## **Dressing for the Viola: An Autoethnographic and Historical Exploration of Women's Orchestral "Blacks"**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the little-studied relationship between classical musicians and their "blacks"—the name given to the black dress typically worn by orchestra members and soloists in formal classical performance settings. A musician's performance attire must allow them to make the continuous bodily movements required to perform often remarkably complicated repertoire while functioning as a quasi-performance costume that signals identity, professionalism, class, gender, and a sense of occasion. Rather than being a study of fashion history, this article is an autoethnographic historical study that examines the origins, embodiment, and cultural meanings of historical dresswear that have shaped how contemporary women dress to perform on the viola as part of a symphony orchestra.

### **A Note on the Text**

This autoethnographic study of women's orchestral dress draws on the archetypal classical sonata form for its structure. Sonata form consists of an exposition, which introduces the first and second subjects, or themes; a development, where harmonic and textual possibilities are explored; and a recapitulation, where the primary thematic material returns to complete the musical argument. It is akin, in basic literary terms, to an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The sonata form is the most common form for the first movement of works entitled "Sonata," a work for two or more instruments. One of the most important works written for the viola is *Sonata for Viola and Piano* (1919) by the famous twentieth-century viola virtuoso, composer, and key subject of this article, Rebecca Clarke.

## **Exposition**

*I pull the black top over my head in the changeroom, roll my shoulders down and back, and raise my arms to the height and angles they would be if I were playing my viola. I pretend to play my absent instrument and investigate the sensations in my upper body, making sure that I can answer yes to the questions in a checklist that I have developed over a lifetime of playing viola:*

- *Can I extend my right arm out to the side so that I can do different bowing strokes with ease?*
- *Is the garment loose enough under my armpits, triceps, and around my neck?*
- *Is there enough room across my upper thoracic spine so that I can move my shoulders with ease?*
- *Are the cuffs loose enough so that I can extend my arms and move my wrists without feeling restricted?*

*I am happy. The top looks smart with my black cigarette pants and flat black shoes. It fits nicely and it grants the mobility that I need to play. I breathe a sigh of relief. I've now got some smart new "blacks" to wear at my next concert—my first formal performance with an orchestra in more than twenty years.*

In 2020 I joined the Woollahra Philharmonic Orchestra (WPO) in Sydney, Australia, and had to wear all black, or "blacks," to perform in the orchestra's upcoming concert, a standard performance dress code for musicians around the world trained in the European classical tradition (classical musicians) dating back many hundreds of years. Within the context of a contemporary orchestral performance, blacks function as a quasi-uniform that signals the formality of the performance, a sense of occasion, a musician's years of training in classical music and dedication to performing to a high standard, and historical messages linked to

class. On a personal level, the blacks I had chosen also signalled gender identity and allowed me to make the continuous bodily movements tied specifically to the peculiarities of viola playing so that I could perform the complicated repertoire to the standard required by the orchestra.

**<Insert Figure 1 near here>**

**<caption>**The author, dressed to perform with the WPO. Photograph by author, 2020.

According to John Harvey, the concept of “professional black” that arose in relation to men’s dress in nineteenth-century Europe signalled the dignity of learning and the importance and standing of professionals in society.<sup>1</sup> Even prior to this, however, black was the working colour of musicians and instrument-makers across Europe because it conveyed an element of “self-effacement and invisibility” on the part of the artist, as well as the “high impersonal demands of an art.”<sup>2</sup> The Italian (Cremonese) Renaissance painting, ‘Portrait of Musician’ (c.1570 – 1590), for example, shows a man seated in front of a music stand holding a bass viol and bow and wearing a black, buttoned doublet and hose with a white lace collar and white ruff sleeves. The man is believed to be either the Brescian master luthier and double bass virtuoso, Gasparo Bertolotti, aka Gasparo da Salò (1540 – 1609), or the composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567 – 1643). The musician’s clothes also demonstrate his success – well-tailored, black clothes, buttons, and fine lace were all very expensive garments in the Renaissance era. Wearing all black also signalled that musicians were in the service of an orchestra, perhaps under the patronage of a nobleman. More than five hundred years later, wearing all black to perform still signals professionalism and that a musician has submitted themselves to arduous training and servitude to this hard-earned skill.<sup>3</sup> Harvey’s observations

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<sup>1</sup> John Harvey, *Men in Black*, Reaktion Books, London, England, 1995, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, op cit., p. 119.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, op cit., p. 148.

aside, the dress worn by orchestral musicians to perform so-called classical music within formal settings remains largely unexplored within scholarship, despite the complex relationship that classical musicians have with their blacks.

The longer history of Western orchestral musicians' blacks is tied largely to the history of men's dress. This is because the prevailing social attitudes in Europe and the Americas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries decreed that while "the acquisition of musical skills by women was applauded," performances were to be kept to the private, rather than the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, by the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there were numerous prominent female violin virtuosi who studied at the leading global music colleges and conservatoria and toured concert stages internationally, including the American Lady Leonora Speyer (1872–1956), who studied and performed in Europe and was also a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, a glamorous London society wife, and the subject of a portrait by John Singer Sargent in 1907. Women in Europe, however, did not work as professional musicians in orchestras of international standing until the 1910s, despite being as talented, hardworking, qualified, and experienced as men. The number of women playing in orchestras of international standing increased only slowly during the twentieth century and most orchestras in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States today remain male-dominated, with men still holding 60 per cent of the positions in the forty existing orchestras of international standing.<sup>5</sup> One of the first women to perform with a leading professional orchestra was the twentieth-century English viola virtuoso and composer Rebecca Clarke (1886–1979).

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<sup>4</sup> Desmond Charles Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides, "Orchestrated Sex: The Representation of Male and Female Musicians in World-Class Symphony Orchestras," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Lausanne, Switzerland, Volume 10, Article 1760, 2019, pp. 1–18.

<sup>5</sup> Sergeant and Himonides, *op cit.*, p. 3.

Clarke, along with four women violinists and another violist, Sybil Maturin, were hired by the conductor and composer Sir Henry Wood (1869–1944) to play with the Queen’s Hall Orchestra (QHO) in London from October 1913 at the urging of his wife, Lady Wood, and Lady Speyer, though the great Belgian violin virtuoso Eugène-Auguste Ysaÿe (1858–1931) had floated the idea with Sir Wood some years previously.<sup>6</sup> The women’s predominantly black performance attire, as much as their presence in the prestigious orchestra, signalled a place of passage and transformation for women at a time in British history when women were locked in often violent struggles to obtain equal rights and suffrage. This article argues that how women dress for orchestral and performances for the viola today is influenced by the rise of the viola as a solo instrument in the early-twentieth century and the dress and performances of the great male violin and viola virtuosos of era, as much as by the Clarke herself.

### **First Subject. The Viola and the Lounge Suit: Modern Dress for Modern Sounds**

Go and read something about Brahms, read something about the period, read about Joachim, read about Schumann. Have some feeling for the period.

—Primrose to a student, 1979

For more than 300 years prior to the dawn of the twentieth century, the viola was generally been considered inferior to the violin. Historically, second-rate violinists were often encouraged to play the viola instead of the violin and despite there being several important

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<sup>6</sup> “Women in Orchestras,” *The Common Cause*, 24 October 1913, p. 497.

works for viola, the instrument was woefully under-represented on the concert stage.<sup>7</sup> The viola's register is likely one reason for this: its alto voice does not easily rise above the rest of the orchestra like that of the violin, nor does it easily sit below the orchestra, like the cello's. In 1894, however, the viola's fortunes appeared to change in Europe: the Paris Conservatoire appointed its first professor of viola, and Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) effectively established a new genre for the instrument when he transcribed his Clarinet Sonatas, op. 120, nos 1 and 2, for his friend, the violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim (1831–1907), to perform on the viola. Brahms's regard for the viola in his later life was heightened by Joachim, who composed the *Hebrew Melodies for Viola, Op. 9* (1854) and owned the Ex Joachim, Joseph Vieland viola by Gasparo da Salò, Brescia (before 1609).<sup>8</sup> It was, however, the English virtuoso Lionel Tertis (1876–1975) who was among the first to recognise the viola's potential as a solo instrument when he switched to the viola from the violin in 1895. Tertis produced such a beautiful, moving tone from the viola that "his contemporaries were eager for him to produce works for him to perform."<sup>9</sup> This included the English composers Ralph Vaughn Williams (1872–1958), who took up the viola while he was at school at Charterhouse in the 1880s; York Bowen (1884–1961), who was also a violist; and Sir Arnold Edward Trevor Bax (1883–1953). In Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, composers like Max Reger

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<sup>7</sup> Nelson, Sheila M., *The Violin and Viola: History, Structure, Techniques*, Dover Publications, Mineola, United States, 2003, p. 191. Important works include Telemann's Viola Concerto in G Major, TWV 51:G9 (1716–1721), Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B Flat Major, BWV 1051 (1721), Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for Violin, Viola and Orchestra in E $\flat$  Major, K. 364 (320d) (1779), and Schumann's *Märchenbilder* for Piano and Viola, Op. 113 (1851). The viola was also not entirely neglected—Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert were among the great composers who enjoyed playing the viola and understood the importance of its role in the orchestra.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson, op cit., p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, op cit., pp. 191–192.

(1873–1916) and later the violist and composer Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) championed the instrument with the composition of many important works. The Swiss-Jewish composer Ernest Bloch (1880–1959) was also a great advocate for the viola, composing key works for the instrument in America during the late 1910s, the same time that Clarke was promoting the viola’s solo capabilities in New York through her own virtuosic performances and compositions.

At the same time that the viola was being modernised, so too were men’s dress practices, with increased scrutiny being placed on the newly developed lounge suit, which, along with how it was accessorised and worn, became a simultaneous marker of class, individual expression, self-fashioning, and adherence to ideals of “fitting in.”<sup>10</sup> Great attention was paid socially, in lectures and in the press, to the importance of men’s dress, especially by the Moravian-born and Vienna-based modernist architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933), whose 1898 essay, “Die Herrenmode” (Men’s Fashion), stressed that the correct style was to be dressed so as not to draw attention to oneself.<sup>11</sup> A gentleman, Loos opined, must both dress and behave in a correct manner, and by the 1910s, these practices had become “inextricably linked.”<sup>12</sup> The connections between correct dress and correct behaviour continued to be demonstrated in the Viennese men’s “fashion magazine” *Die Herrenwelt: Zeitschrift für die Herrenmode*

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Breward, *The Suit: Form, Function and Style*, Reaktion Books, London, England, 2016; Michael Carter, *Being Prepared: Aspects of Dress and Dressing*, Puncher & Wattmann, Glebe, Australia, 2017; Jonathan C. Kaplan, “The Man in the Suit: Jewish Men and Fashion in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, Taylor & Francis Group, London, England, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2020, pp. 1–28.

<sup>11</sup> Adolf Loos, “Men’s Fashion”, in *Spoken into the Void: Collected Essays 1897–1900*, trans. Jane O. Newman and John H. Smith, Cambridge, United States, MIT Press, [1898] 1982, pp. 11–14.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan C. Kaplan, “Looking and Behaving: Sartorial Politics and Jewish Men in *Fin-de-siècle* Vienna”, *Critical Studies in Men’s Fashion*, Intellect, London, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, 2018, p. 12.

(Men's World: The Newspaper for Men's Fashion) (1916–18), but even prior to this the lounge suit, which was generally black or other muted colours and worn with a shirt and tie, quickly became the default standard for correct day wear and provided a “uniform of sober, modern, masculine respectability across professional and class boundaries.”<sup>13</sup> Men in professional and commercial roles alike exhibited their “would-be strength, steadfastness, and immunity from frivolous distraction” as well as their “seriousness of mood and devotion to duty” through the “thickness of material and solidity of structure of their tailored garments, in the heavy and sober blackness of their shoes, in the virgin whiteness and starched stiffness of their collars and of their shirt-fronts.”<sup>14</sup> The lounge suit was also adopted at this time by professional male classical musicians across the world as the correct style of dress when studying, teaching, rehearsing and performing in less formal settings than the concert hall when men's white tie evening dress was worn. In addition, the colour and uniformity of a black suit transformed the male body in orchestras and ensembles into an “invisible entity,” giving it “absolute anonymity in the crowd,” while a black performance costume “makes a character metonymic with respect to his clothes.”<sup>15</sup> A black suit, therefore, transformed a male performer into a metonymic musician and the orchestra into a visually cohesive unit that allowed the audience to focus on the music.

**<Insert Figure 2 near here>**

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<sup>13</sup> Breward, op cit., p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Hogarth Press, London, England, 1940, p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, trans. Lisa Adams, Berg, London, England, 2004, chap. 12, para. 5.



<caption>The Joachim Quartet, Berlin (1894). From left to right: Joseph Joachim, Robert Hausmann, Emanuel Wirth, Carl Halir. *Echo Muzyczne* [Musical echo], Warsaw, Poland, No. 547 (12), 24 March 1894.

## **Second Subject. Becoming a Violist**

Wearing a black lounge suit and white tie also constituted a situated bodily practice, the significance of which was as important to the male body's movements, actions, and behaviour as the social and cultural forces that acted upon it.<sup>16</sup> A situated bodily practice emerges as a series of ongoing and continuous reciprocal relations between bodily movements and the garments worn and can be “understood as the first-person somatic experiences of wearing clothing” that the wearer is more or less conscious of, depending on their situation.<sup>17</sup> Playing the viola is also a series of ongoing and continuous reciprocal relations among bodily movements, the viola, and the bow, which are then incorporated within the first-person somatic experience of wearing clothing. Because of the instrument's large size and its similarity to the violin, many violists start learning the violin when they are very young and later switch to the viola, including players like Tertis, Clarke, and the Scottish virtuoso, William Primrose (1904–1982).<sup>18</sup> The tacit aspects of viola practice and performance therefore come to be experienced as natural to musicians, since they are learned

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<sup>16</sup> Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Polity Press, Cambridge, England, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Todd Robinson, “Attaining Poise: A Movement-Based Lens Exploring Embodiment in Fashion,” *Fashion Theory*, Taylor & Francis, London, England, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2019, p. 442.

<sup>18</sup> There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. The internationally respected German violist Tabea Zimmermann (1966–), for example, started learning the viola at the age of three.

at a very early age.<sup>19</sup> I started learning violin when I was three and my first lessons were how to stand and hold the instrument and bow correctly. This, by extension, implicitly taught me how my dressed body should feel when I hold a violin and/or viola, and elements from these foundation lessons were felt throughout my life and are still present in my body, more than forty-seven years later.

**<Insert Figure 3 near here>**

**<caption>** The author, aged 3, practising the violin in their living room. My left hand was not yet developed, but the right hand was looking good. Photograph by author's mother, 1976.

**<Insert Figure 4 near here>**

**<caption>** The author, aged 18, playing the viola in their grandfather's living room. The image shows the felt-sense of ease and balance in dress while playing that has been developed over 15 years of almost daily violin and viola practise. Photograph by author's father, 1991.

A violist's body, however, also needs a "felt-sense of ease, balance or 'fit' [within dress]. This sense of fit [is] not obtained immediately, but results from coordinated movements, each calibrated as a more refined response to the one that preceded it," both from the bodily practice of dress and from practising the instrument.<sup>20</sup> Difficult passages are practised almost to perfection so that the musician can feel at ease during a performance, but the sense of ease, balance, and fit in performance and dress is not a static point; rather, it constitutes a forward-going series of adaptive movements where the body, the instrument, and dress respond to

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<sup>19</sup> Entwistle, op cit., p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, op cit., p. 452.

each other in what Robinson calls a “mutual kind of becoming or exchange.”<sup>21</sup> Despite years of training, therefore, a violist remains at least initially conscious of their clothing when playing, at times even deliberately incorporating and using that awareness of dress to enhance performance and practice techniques. Tertis, for example, recalled wearing a “very heavy, voluminous, moth-eaten fur coat while practising at home” when practising passages high up in the vicinity of the bridge.<sup>22</sup> This made the passages much more difficult for Tertis during practise sessions so that they felt easier to perform in public when he was “clad in an ordinary thin jacket.”<sup>23</sup> Based on Tertis’s observations, I have also recently started to wear a bulky, old fur coat at times while practising passages in high positions and have noticed a similar ease of performance in public when clad in my thinner blacks. I recently wore high-heeled shoes when sitting to perform so that my thighs would be parallel to the floor, allowing me to place my bow across my legs without fear of it rolling off my lap during long passages of pizzicato. This awareness of dress when playing, however, generally shifts to the back of the player’s consciousness during a performance due to years of training that teaches a musician to enter a flow state when playing. The influence of the dressed body on playing the viola nonetheless remains.

Many of the bodily movements required to play are inherited and then adapted by each musician to suit their own first-person somatic experience and to incorporate social and cultural changes that are simultaneously reflected in, and driven by, fashion and dress. Violists frequently draw on knowledge gained from their teachers and from “performance

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<sup>21</sup> Robinson, op cit., p. 452.

<sup>22</sup> Lionel Tertis, *My Viola and I: A Complete Autobiography*, Kahn & Averill, London, England, 2000, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> Tertis, op cit., p. 96

experiences, or ... apprenticeship[s] of observation” to develop as musicians.<sup>24</sup> This observation includes the transmission of verbal and non-verbal, or tacit, aspects of practice and performance, such as “movements, gesture, performed skills, interactions with material, equipment, and behavior.”<sup>25</sup> Tertis and Primrose both “advocated listening as a pedagogical tool and believed that violists should attend as many concerts as possible.”<sup>26</sup> Tertis also admitted that he honed his style of viola-playing principally through listening to violin virtuosos due to a paucity of high-quality viola players at the *fin-de-siècle*, noting that the most significant event in his early musical training was the first time he heard Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962) perform in London in 1901.<sup>27</sup> Kreisler, an acculturised Viennese Jew, wore the “correct dress” when practising and teaching: a sober three-piece lounge suit that, like his modernising of the violin, expressed that he was a modern European, not “a relic from the past.”<sup>28</sup> The suit and its “multitude of symbolic registers ... promised [Kreisler] the possibility of respectability, equality and invisibility.”<sup>29</sup> In Vienna, the modern lounge suit itself was also a symbol of men’s elegance, as British modes of aristocratic masculine sartorial consumption “reigned supreme in the Austrian capital.”<sup>30</sup> Kreisler’s quasi-British mode of dress and correspondingly correct gentlemanly behaviour were noted wherever he travelled, including

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<sup>24</sup> Haston and Leo-Guerro in Sophie Elizabeth Parker, *A Survey of Viola Teachers’ Perceptions of Viola Pedagogy*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, United States, 2014, p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Marchant, “The Body and the Senses: Visual Methods, Videography and the Submarine Sensorium,” *Body & Society*, Sage, Los Angeles, United States, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2011, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> Parker, op cit., p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Tertis, op cit., pp. 16, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Kaplan, op cit., 2020, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, op cit., 2020, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, op cit., 2020, p. 5.

during his Australian tour in 1925, where critics and violinists alike considered Kreisler not just a visiting celebrity, but a man who

took on heroic proportions. Not only were his musical performances exemplary models for musical behaviour, but he was by all accounts monumentally talented, yet modest, unpretentious, hardworking, dependable, loyal and generous to charitable causes. In short, Kreisler represented a perfect embodiment of the chivalric gentleman or modern-day knight.<sup>31</sup>

Primrose also observed Kreisler's correct behaviour, writing that a string player must "behave like a gentleman, or a lady, sit or stand, and keep as still as possible," and that the virtuosi Jascha Heifetz (1901–1987) and Kreisler were "ideal examples of great distinction on the platform, great aristocracy."<sup>32</sup> Primrose's playing was greatly influenced by Kreisler and Ysäye: he recorded in Kreisler's string quartet and studied with Ysäye in 1924, who suggested Primrose switch to viola.<sup>33</sup> Primrose's observations suggest that the musician requires a sense of poise on stage: that is, a "sense of being at ease or in contact with a situation."<sup>34</sup> Kreisler's "correct" dress and his behaviour on the concert platform signalled his belonging and being at ease in situations where he performed for, and mingled with, the world's wealthy and powerful. For the Jewish Tertis, who sought to modernise the viola, wearing a three-piece lounge suit throughout his life performed a similar semiotic function to

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<sup>31</sup> Anne-Marie Forbes, "The Local Impact of an International Celebrity: Fritz Kreisler in Australasia," *Musicology Australia*, Taylor & Francis, London, England, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2009, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in David Dalton, *Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, England, 1988, pp. 172, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Violin Storytelling, "William Primrose 'A Violist's Legacy,'" YouTube video, 28:31, 21 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT8M3i57DFY>.

<sup>34</sup> Robinson op cit., p. 450.

Kreisler's lounge suit, while his emulation of Kreisler's performance style required his adoption of the "correct behaviour." Tertis's performances and teaching enabled other violists to flourish and modernise the instrument, such as Primrose, who was deeply impressed with Tertis's beautiful tone production after hearing him play in Paris in 1928.<sup>35</sup> It also included the unequivocally elegant Rebecca Clarke, who took private lessons with Tertis between 1908 and 1910 while studying composition at the Royal College of Music in London.

<Insert Figure 5 near here>

<caption>Lionel Tertis, c.1903. Tertis is seated in a dark suit, holding his viola and bow. Photograph courtesy of the Jerwood Library of the Performing Arts, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.

### **Development. Rebecca Clarke, Women's Orchestral Blacks and the Embodiment of Poise**

The correct dress and behaviour for gentlemen in formal situations at the *fin-de-siècle* was, according to Loos, that which enabled a man to fit in: "A red dress coat stands out in a ballroom. It follows that a red dress coat is unmodern in the ballroom."<sup>36</sup> The Viennese publication *Wie man sich richtig Kleidet* (How to Dress Correctly), for example, set out all of the correct components of a white tie to be worn on formal evening occasions, such as the

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<sup>35</sup> Tully Potter, "About This Recording, 8.111382—PRIMROSE, William: Recital, Vol. 1 (1939–47)," Naxos Records, Hong Kong, accessed 23 November 2021, [https://www.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs\\_reviews.asp?item\\_code=8.111382&catNum=8111382&filetype=About%20this%20Recording&language=English](https://www.naxos.com/mainsite/blurbs_reviews.asp?item_code=8.111382&catNum=8111382&filetype=About%20this%20Recording&language=English).

<sup>36</sup> Loos, op cit., [1898] 1982, p. 11.

theatre, balls, the opera, and the symphony.<sup>37</sup> White tie was also adopted by male orchestral musicians as a quasi-working uniform for formal performances, most likely to fit in by mirroring their wealthy audiences' dress and to reflect modern innovations in orchestral music and playing. Flügel observed, however, that one of the "penalties attached to the very slow development of men's dress in recent years is that servants are apt to catch up with their masters, as has happened in the case of waiters."<sup>38</sup> Men's poise in the correct orchestral dress was therefore crucial, as "musicians in those days were still sometimes looked upon as members of the lower classes especially by the servants themselves, the worst snobs of all," as Clarke has remarked.<sup>39</sup> The wish for class mobility among professional musicians was of particular significance within the changing nature of classical music in London at the turn of the century and coincided with the establishment of the QHO in London in 1895. The Queen's Hall was the premier concert hall in central London in the early twentieth century and its orchestra among the finest in the world. The hall's proximity to the shopping and amusements of Oxford and Regent Streets and the West End likely influenced Wood's decision to respond to the changing English cultural landscape and democratise access to formal orchestral performances. In 1895, he founded the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts (now known as "The Proms"), which offered lower ticket prices and an informal atmosphere where audiences were permitted to eat, drink, and smoke during concerts. Wood's goal was to "run nightly concerts and train the public by easy stages. Popular at first, gradually raising the standard until I have created a public for classical and modern music."<sup>40</sup> This did not

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<sup>37</sup> *Wie man sich richtig Kleidet*, 1917, pp. 12–13.

<sup>38</sup> Flügel, op cit., p. 135.

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Clarke, *The Mustard Spoon (I Had a Father, Too)*, unpublished memoirs, 1969–1973, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Ivan Hewett, "The Proms and the Promenaders," *Daily Telegraph*, London, England, 12 July 2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/3666494/The-Proms-and-the-Promenaders.html>.

mean, however, that the standard of musicianship of the QHO was sub-par. For example, Tertis was the QHO's principal violist from 1895 to 1904 when he left to pursue his solo career, while the composers who performed their own works with the QHO in its first twenty years included Claude Debussy, Edward Elgar, Edvard Grieg, Maurice Ravel, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Richard Strauss.

By the 1910s the association of orchestral musicians with the lower classes was shifting, as they were among the first white-collar workers whose professions “produced new conditions for social mobility and social interchange, which began to rearrange former established social classifications.”<sup>41</sup> Women, too, sought opportunities to participate in this new professional sphere, with the foundation of the Society of Women Musicians (SWM) in London in 1911. The founders included composer Katharine Emily Eggar, musicologist Marion Scott, and singer Gertrude Eaton. A total of thirty-seven women came to the SWM's first meeting, including Clarke, and from 1912 the SWM held regular concerts at the Queen's Hall and the Aeolian and Wigmore Halls, featuring works and performances by its members. In October 1913, the established social classifications within the orchestral world were further destabilised when Wood appointed Clarke and five other women to the QHO as professional musicians, the first time in British history that women had been appointed to a major professional orchestra outside of provinces. Born to an upper-middle-class, English-German family, Clarke was a part of the rising professional class of women in Edwardian London. Clarke began studying violin at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) in 1903, but was withdrawn by her father in 1905 after the RAM's Professor of Counterpoint and Harmony, Percy Hilder Miles (1878–1922), proposed to her. Clarke made the first of many visits to the

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<sup>41</sup> Barbara Burman, *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman, Berg, Oxford, England, 1999, pp. 33-54, para. 22.



United States after leaving the Royal Academy and attended the Royal College of Music (RCM) in London from 1908 to 1910, where she switched to the viola following a recommendation by her composition teacher, Sir Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), that it would benefit her composition skills. From 1910, however, Clarke had to support herself as her father turned her out of the house and cut her off financially due to her criticism of his womanising. Clarke therefore earned a living playing the viola in London, including working with the QHO between 1913 and 1916, whereafter she went on tour to New York and remained until 1919. The First World War meant that Clarke had difficulty obtaining a visa to return to the United Kingdom, so she decided to stay in New York through to the 1919 Berkshire Festival Competition, devoted to compositions for viola and piano.

The five other women, like Clarke, had all studied at the RCM and secured their positions with the QHO over more than fifty other auditioning women. They were among the “army” of young working women during the era who came to “invade” professions formerly identified as the domains of men.<sup>42</sup> Wood told the press, “They do the same work [as the men] and it is of the same quality ... So far the experiment is working splendidly.”<sup>43</sup> Lady Wood also emphasised that “the salaries paid to the women must be on the same basis as that of the men.”<sup>44</sup> The women, who were the subject of numerous press articles and photographs across the United Kingdom, were also arguably central figures in the transformation of entertainment, leisure, and amusement within London, bearing aesthetic and symbolic similarities to the figure of the “shopgirl”—a woman of “middle-class background who [was]

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<sup>42</sup> Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labour, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880–1920*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, United States, 2006, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> “Ladies of the Orchestra,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, Pall Mall, England, 17 October 1913, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> “Ladies of the Orchestra,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, Pall Mall, England, 17 October 1913, p. 9.

compelled by financial hardship to take up ‘manual’ labour,” yet who required a sense of poise and understanding of the correct dress.<sup>45</sup> Even Clarke herself admitted, “The viola is an exhausting instrument at the best of times.”<sup>46</sup> Like the modern department store, which offered democratised access to displays of fashion and luxury, Wood’s quasi-democratisation of classical music, with his offers of cheaper tickets and an informal atmosphere, gradually transformed the rarefied atmosphere of the Queen’s Hall into a place where the average consumer could participate in the domain of high culture. Playing the viola also involved a particular engagement of Clarke’s body in the display culture of the concert hall, a culture which, like shopgirls, “demanded a certain gentility ... and provided a socially acceptable location for a type of public employment perceived as appropriate to their gender.”<sup>47</sup> For shopgirls, and Clarke alike, this included an awareness of how to dress and behave correctly in accordance with the dress codes that constituted their quasi-uniforms.

At Harrods, for example, women shop assistants were “requested to wear ‘neat plain black, made in good taste, and in keeping with the department they are employed in’, accompanied by black stockings.”<sup>48</sup> The uniform at Selfridges in 1911 was “a black serge long-sleeved, high necked dress, black woollen stockings and sturdy black shoes, and the appropriate underwear.”<sup>49</sup> The QHO also had a dress code for performances: a photograph of the QHO taken around 1909 shows all of the men wearing evening dress, their standard performance attire since the QHO’s first concert in December 1893, which was attended by the Prince of

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<sup>45</sup> Sanders, op cit., p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Clarke, op cit., p. 70)

<sup>47</sup> Sanders, op cit., p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Sanders, op cit., p. 67

<sup>49</sup> Sanders, op cit., pp. 81, 82.

Wales, Duke Alfred of Saxe-Coburg, and the Duke of Connaught. Clarke and the other women did not have black suits that would serve the same semiotic function as their male colleagues' dress, but, as Wood told the press, "The lady members will be seated in twos and fours in the first and second violins and violas, and they will be dressed in black."<sup>50</sup> The women's blacks became quasi-uniforms that designated "status, competence and hierarchy," while also working to demonstrate how their bodies became an "extension of [their] occupations," expressing "shifting ideas of gender" within the institution of the orchestra and the London social and cultural landscape.<sup>51</sup> It also helped to transform the women into an "occupational persona of a suite of trained body techniques and mental attributes," which became even more apparent when the orchestral performance commenced.<sup>52</sup> Further, within the era's occupational uniforms, there was "sometimes allowed some measure of individual variation. ... Only the main lines are prescribed by custom, and, so long as the costume is clearly recognisable for what it is intended, the minor details are allowed to vary."<sup>53</sup> There was, therefore, a degree of latitude for the shopgirl to express her individual style and signal her professionalism, provided she adhered to the department store's dress code, and a similar degree of latitude, which Clarke embraced, within the orchestra's dress code.

Clothing consumption in professional contexts for Edwardian, white-collar working women was "a purposeful act which served as a form of investment, part of a strategic construction

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<sup>50</sup> "Ladies of the Orchestra," *Pall Mall Gazette*, Pall Mall, England, 17 October 1913, p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression*, Bloomsbury Digital Resources edition, Berg, Oxford, England, 2005, pp. 103–138, paras 7–8.

<sup>52</sup> Craik, *op cit.*, pp. 103–138, para. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Flügel, *op cit.*, p. 134.

of an image of competence, reliability and employability.”<sup>54</sup> Clarke’s memoirs and writings reveal that she had a highly developed sense of fashion and dress, and was such a skilled seamstress and embroiderer that she made many of the clothes she performed in as a soloist and chamber musician in the world’s major concert halls. Clarke, therefore, understood the strategic importance of dressing as stylishly as possible when performing to signal her professionalism and to “fit” within an ensemble. Clarke’s sartorial flair also came into play during her first performances with the QHO. At the age of eighteen, Clarke was sent to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to stay with her father’s friend, the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842–1910). Clarke quickly realized to her surprise and dismay that her clothes were not of the same calibre as the Jameses’, so James’s wife, Alice (1849–1922), took Clarke to her dressmaker and, as a special treat, ordered Clarke “the most beautiful dress I had ever seen ... a long white crepe-de-chine, sweeping and rustling over taffeta, with a wide bertha of white lace falling over the shoulders.”<sup>55</sup> Publicity photographs of the women of the QHO show Clarke wearing a black dress, stockings, and shoes, and a large, white lace bertha, an ensemble that she also wore when performing with the QHO. The women’s dress echoed the men’s professional performance attire and literally positioned them as “white-collar” workers, with the “virgin whiteness ... of their collars” signalling their “immunity from frivolous distraction.”<sup>56</sup> Clarke’s musical training, poise in dress, performance experience, and qualifications clearly meant that she “fitted” in with the men of the QHO, but she was undoubtedly aware that her height (Clarke was 178 cm tall), gender, and the media attention surrounding the women’s appointments initially made her a conspicuous curiosity on the male-dominated stage. Clarke would also have known that the

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<sup>54</sup> Burman, *op cit.*, pp. 33–54, para. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Clarke, *op cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>56</sup> Flügel, *op cit.*, p. 75.

large white bertha, while visually dramatic against her blacks, would not impede her playing; rather, she likely used it on stage to signal her individuality, her elegance, and her understanding that the women would stand out, no matter how they tried to “fit” into the male-dominated workplace.

Nonetheless, traces of the situated bodily practice of wearing a lounge suit were also likely present within Clarke’s poise when playing, which would have further helped her to fit visually into the ensemble once Wood rose his conductor’s baton. Clarke’s immersion in the London world of classical music also included attending concerts, including seeing Ysäye, Kreisler, and the Joachim Quartet perform, as well as her training with Tertis. This meant that Clarke also tacitly understood the bearing, techniques, movement, and poise in professional day and evening dress of the great male virtuosi and could, if she so chose, incorporate these aspects within her own poise when performing. Furthermore, Clarke recalled that her life around the age of thirteen was not happy and so her “melancholy high spirits vented themselves in ... dressing-up to escape being who I was—strutting around in one of Papa’s suits in imitation of the way my idol, Eugene Ysäye, walked onto the Queen’s Hall platform.”<sup>57</sup> Although it is not entirely clear how Clarke walked onto the Queen’s Hall platform to take her seat with the orchestra, her blacks and poise within dress pointed to a reformulation and transformation of what Patrizia Calefato refers to as “citations and archetypes” that alluded to “a whole range of cultural texts and discourses.”<sup>58</sup> This included allusions to the visual culture of professional working women in Edwardian London and evidence of how the masculine, situated bodily practice of wearing a lounge suit had been reformulated by Clarke within the context of the QHO’s dress code. As Calefato notes,

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<sup>57</sup> Clarke, *op cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>58</sup> Calefato, *op cit.*, para. 9.

“Black can be an unusual, unheard note ... it is something that produces a particular kind of aesthetic pleasure (not necessarily linked to beauty) that turns the body into a place of passage and transformation.”<sup>59</sup> Clarke’s white bertha, black dress, and poise were, therefore, not unmodern in the concert hall; rather, they signalled her participation in London’s changing social and cultural landscape and her hard work in modernising both the viola as an instrument that rightly belonged on the concert stage and the institution of the orchestra into a place where women rightly belonged.

<Insert Figure 6 near here>

<Caption>Rebecca Clarke (centre front) and the five other women of the Queen’s Hall Orchestra in 1913. Courtesy of Christopher Johnson, [www.rebeccaclarkecomposer.com](http://www.rebeccaclarkecomposer.com)

### **Recapitulation and Coda. “Wear All Black”**

This article has explored how the scrutiny of men’s dress was just one manifestation of cultural modernism at the dawn of the twentieth century as people explored new sounds and ways of looking, seeing, and being in the world. Other manifestations included the modernisation of the viola as a solo instrument and the rise of a professional orchestral class of women violists and violinists. Being assured of looking and behaving correctly meant that men, and women, were free to take risks in art, music, and their professional lives. Orchestral and solo violinists and violists today who have trained to a high standard can all trace their relationships to dress and playing to the great male and female virtuosos mentioned here (along with their contemporaries) via a genealogy of pedagogy and performance attendance as their influence spread across the twentieth century. The appointment of Clarke and the five other

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<sup>59</sup> Calefato, *op cit.*, para. 25.

women to the QHO also points to their significance in wider debates of the era, from evolving labour practices and modern music's aesthetic demands to the implications for female suffrage and equality. Wood's requirement for the women to wear black, and his decision to pay them the same salaries as the men, indicated an attempt to ensure they fitted visually and collegially into the orchestra by becoming part of the efficient machine and the visual panorama that an orchestra embodies. The QHO women's blacks signalled their professionalism and played the unheard note of women in a professional orchestra, while their differing collars and trims showed personal variation in their uniforms. Clarke's first orchestral blacks and her poise in dress in 1913 heralded the arrival of the viola, and of women, within a profession that had looked down on both for centuries.

Prior to 1913, however, the historical exclusion of women from professional orchestras of international standing in London has meant that women's orchestral dress practices and dress codes appeared to have evolved as an afterthought in the absence of a uniformity in women's formal dress practices. The result is that more than 100 years later, many orchestras of international standing—for example, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO)—require women to wear “evening black” for the most formal performances, while the men are in tails. Despite this requirement, however, the only uniformity in dress for the women of the MSO is that they wear black, with the dress code stating, “For Evening Black, skirts/pants should be floor length. Tops must cap the shoulder, sleeveless tops are permitted; however, no shoestring, off the shoulder, or strapless tops are allowed. When considering the overall coverage of sleeves, back and cleavage must be considered—**not too much skin please.**”<sup>60</sup> The MSO's women's blacks must, therefore, fit in with the black coverage of the men's suit

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<sup>60</sup> Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, *Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Employee Handbook*, Melbourne, Australia, 2020, unpublished document, n.p. Bold in original.

jackets. As in 1913, the blacks women wear on stage to perform today are as varied as the players themselves, meaning that their blacks provide a uniformity in dress on the stage, rather than being a uniform per se, and variations always occur, even if the orchestra has a specific dress code. The women's blacks of the WPO are similarly varied.

It is hoped that this study has opened a new field of enquiry into the social and cultural impacts of changes in dress codes of professional orchestras over the last 100 years, as well as the impact that dress has on musicians themselves. This may include orchestras that have changed their dress codes during various decades to reflect fashionable silhouettes, or orchestras that have worked with leading fashion designers to obtain comfort in a more traditional style of dress. For example, in 2016 the Vienna Philharmonic unveiled new suits designed by Vivienne Westwood and Andreas Kronthaler, but the orchestra has not fully adopted them,<sup>61</sup> while in the twenty-first century, the Australian Chamber Orchestra has worn blacks designed specifically for them by the Japanese Australian fashion designer Akira Isogawa (1964–). In 2018, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra introduced new outfits created by the Parsons New School for Design, which were made of high-tech, breathable fabrics donated by the Baltimore-based athletic wear company Under Armour and promised musicians a greater ease of movement while looking similar to traditional blacks.<sup>62</sup> Although twenty-first century audiences are increasingly wearing more casual attire to the opera,

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Cooper, "Women of the Philharmonic Can Play It All. Just Not in Pants," *New York Times*, New York, United States, 14 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/14/arts/music/new-york-philharmonic-women-dress-code.html> (restricted access).

<sup>62</sup> Tim Smith, "BSO, Alsop Wrap Up Season with Meaty American, Russian Program," *Baltimore Sun*, Baltimore, United States, 8 June 2018, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/bs-fe-bso-review-0610-story.html>.



symphony and ballet, many orchestras of international standing continue the tradition of men wearing white tie and tails for formal performances. Dress codes for men's blacks for less formal performances are similarly laid out in the musicians' employee handbooks.<sup>63</sup>

While the prescriptive, finer points of orchestral dress codes for women remain contested as ways of dressing become increasingly gender neutral and more casual, the standard of wearing blacks for performances remains.<sup>64</sup> Every time I buy new performance blacks, I raise my arms to mimic playing and use my mental checklist to determine whether my clothes still “fit”—whether they still allow me to make the movements I need to play the viola. I have refined these movements for more than forty-seven years, and I continue to refine them each time I practice and perform. My blacks also give a psychological sense of comfort when I play; they reassure me and my audience that I have earned my place within the 500-year social and cultural history of orchestral string-playing and imbue me with seriousness associated with my arduous musical training. My blacks also connect me to the modern history of the viola and signal that my body, especially in the male-dominated classical music world, continues to represent a transformation of historical mores and the location of women in places where they have earned the right to “fit in.”

### **Acknowledgements**

This project is situated within “Imagining Fashion Futures Lab,” led by Peter McNeil at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. I would like to thank Dr Jonathan Kaplan for

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<sup>63</sup> Other ensembles of international standing, such as the Australian Chamber Orchestra, wear orchestral blacks as standard for all of their performances.

<sup>64</sup> The San Francisco Symphony Orchestra now also allows women to wear masculine-style white tie and tails for performances during which the men are required to wear white tie and tails. Cooper, *op cit*.

his generosity in sharing pages from the historical publication *Die Herrenwelt: Zeitschrift für die Herrenmode* (1916–18) and Christopher Johnson for his generosity in sharing Clarke's unpublished memoir and ephemera.

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