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Danielle Belen, virtuoso violinist, to perform final concert in 2010-2011 series

News of the Three Rivers Performing Arts Institute
by Bill Haxton

DANIELLE BELEN is no stranger to Three Rivers. Since last June's inaugural Center Stage Strings music camp, she's visited so frequently and has had such a large impact on our community that it's easy to believe she belongs here.

Even so, very few of us have had the opportunity to hear her perform as a soloist. We've heard her briefly in small exhibitions or as part of a chamber ensemble, but not as a concert soloist, which is the only way to fully realize just what a magnificent virtuoso she is.

When you read her artistic resumé, the story begins to emerge — first prize winner of the 2008 Sphinx Competition, soloist with many of America's major orchestras including Pittsburgh, Atlanta, the Boston Pops, and the legendary Cleveland Orchestra, and performances with such legendary figures as Arnold Steinhardt of the Guarneri Quartet and Menahem Pressler of the Beaux Arts Trio. But that isn't the whole story.

The path to this kind of accomplishment is not easy and not always direct. What the artistic resumé doesn't reveal is the five-year-old girl first working a tiny bow across a one-eighth-size violin; so small it could be concealed in a handbag. It doesn't address the tens of thousands of hours spent practicing, the painful cramps and sore fingertips, the permanent bruises that appear on the neck and the clavicle where the violin is pressed against the body.

Nor does the artistic resumé chronicle the emotional roller coaster of competitions and auditions that don't always turn out as hoped.

For Danielle, there were a couple of major turning points in her life. When she was 14, she was selected as concertmaster of the Orange County Youth Symphony Orchestra. She loved orchestra playing, and because of that experience soon realized she'd be perfectly happy if the rest of her life revolved around violin.



The next turning point occurred when she was 19 at the Encore School for Strings music camp. There, she had the first of many lessons from Professor Robert Lipsett, one of the foremost teachers of violin on earth; a living legend. Under his teaching, Danielle matured as a performer and developed the big, intimate, deeply emotive and prize-winning sound for which she is known today.

That sound is helped along by her violin, a rare 1709 Alessandro Gagliano loaned to her from the Mandell Collection of Southern California. Gaglianos are not as well known as Stradivaris or Guarneris but they were made with extraordinary attention to the thickness of the wood and produce a huge, beautiful sound.

Alessandro Gagliano came by his craft strangely. As a young man he apparently fought a duel, killed his opponent and was forced to escape Naples with the polizia hot on his heels.

He fled into the dense forest near Marighanetto Borgo, shook off the authorities and found a way to live among the trees not for a few days but for several months, gathering saws and hatchets and other survival tools. While there, he began testing the sonic qualities of the wood he cut for fires and shelter, scraping and tapping and listening for tone and resonance.

Finally, word came to him that the police had dropped his case. Still, returning to Naples was risky, so he wandered north to Cremona and found his way into the workshop of Nicolo Amati, rightfully called the father of the modern violin. There Alessandro Gagliano joined Stradivari and Guarneri in Amati's studio, all of them learning the violin-maker's art from its foremost master.

Gagliano returned to Naples in 1695. By then, no one remembered the duel. Gagliano set up his own violin workshop and 14 years later crafted the violin that is now played by Danielle Belen.

Bill Haxton is a resident of Three Rivers and principal in the newly formed Three Rivers Performing Arts Institute.