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Violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn set to perform on famed 'Red Violin'

BY HILLARY S. MEEKS

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One local musician describes the relationship between internationally renowned violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn and her famed Red Mendelssohn violin as a "beautiful marriage."

"It is an extension of me. I like to describe it as though the violin is your voice and obviously it doesn't play by itself ... My violin is like somebody handed you the voice of Pavarotti," Pitcairn said.

It took the touch of a master violin maker and hundreds of years for Pitcairn's red Stradivarius to develop its rich sound. In turn, it took hundreds of dedicated hours and many years for Pitcairn to reach the level of skill with which she pulls her bow across the Stradivarius' strings.

Visalia will be treated to the sounds of this beautiful marriage at a concert at 3 p.m. Sunday at the Main Street Theater.

Those who buy tickets to the concert will also get free admittance to a showing of "The Red Violin," a movie based on Pitcairn's Stradivarius, at 7 p.m. Friday at the Fox Theater.

While the red violin has a voice that Pitcairn loves and admires -her own voice is filled with tenderness and fascination when she talks about it — she knows well the toil it takes to play it to its full potential.

Practice makes perfect

Ever since the age of 4, when Pitcairn's cellist mother had her pick an instrument to play, the violinist would practice three or four hours a day. By middle school she was traveling a two-hour round trip every weekday to see her violin instructor, playing in a symphony on Saturdays, and doing homework any time she wasn't practicing. She looks back on those tough practices with a fondness.

"I thank my mother now for what she gave me because I certainly wouldn't have had the discipline on my own," Pitcairn said.

As for her 291-year-old violin, Pitcairn thanks her grandfather for that particular gift. He bought it at a Christie's auction at a record \$1.7 million, though the identity of the buyer was kept

secret. That is, it was a secret until Pitcairn's career took off and people started to recognize the Red Mendelsshon in the hands of the up-and-coming professional violinist.

Beyond the allure of the violin's physical and audible beauty is its mysterious past: from the time Antonio Stradivari crafted it in 1720 until the Mendelsshon family owned it in 1930s Berlin, no one knows where the violin had been. Those missing 200 years in the violin's existence were such an intrigue to filmmaker Francois Girard that he made a movie, "The Red Violin," speculating on its whereabouts.

An 'amazing journey'

Pitcairn was still keeping the secret of the violin's ownership when she became the third violinist asked to play the score composed for, "The Red Violin," a year after the movie came out.

"It was kind of amazing, this journey," she said.

The journey still continues, with the violin being played before audiences around the world. After 100 years of being owned by the Mendelsshon family and then a New York industrialist, neither of whom played it in public, the violin is enjoying the attention, Pitcairn said.

"I had this feeling that the violin is loving our journey together around the world," she said.

Now the journey's next stops are in Three Rivers in Visalia, as Pitcairn plays a concert in each town. She is brought in part through a collaboration between a summer violin camp in Three Rivers, Center Stage Strings, and the nonprofit Music at the Main. Bill Haxton, creative director for Music at the Main, said the opportunity to hear Pitcairn for \$15 is one no local resident should bypass.

"This is one of those instances where you have a spectacularly talented virtuoso violinist matched up with this instrument that is just perfect for her," he said.

Pitcairn once taught and is now peers with professional violinist Danielle Belen, who founded and directs Center Stage Strings. This is the second year the camp has welcomed exceptionally talented young musicians to Three Rivers for instruction from Belen and other accomplished musicians.

Pitcairn's presence in Tulare County is because of the two violinists' relationship.

"I hired Danielle to be a faculty member at my own summer camp and festival in upstate New York, so when she asked me to do this concert, I said yes," she said.

A music educator

Besides playing in two recitals, Pitcairn will also be teaching the Center Stage Strings students in a master class.

Belen founded the camp after her parents retired in Three Rivers two years ago and she fell in love with the area. She had met Music at the Main creative director Bill Haxton on a previous visit. So she called him with her summer camp idea, and he immediately jumped on board and found a venue for concerts at the Three Rivers Presbyterian Church and host families for the students.

"This whole little idea I had quickly exploded into more," Belen said.

Last year the camp was one week, and this year it is two-weeks long. Most elite music camps last six weeks, Belen said, and Center Stage Strings is moving in that direction.

"I really envision this being world-renown, along the lines of Aspen Music Festival," she said.

Other concerts

There will be several concerts in conjunction with Center Stage Strings besides Pitcairn's ®performances.

The schedule is:

Cellist David Requiro, 7 p.m. June 21. Tickets are \$12

Chamber Music Extravaganza featuring the entire staff of Center Stage Strings 7 p.m. Saturday, June 25.

Student Showcase, 7 p.m. June 23. Concert is free.

Student solo and chamber music recital 4 p.m. June 19 and 26. Concert is free.

For more information, go to www.centerstagestrings.com