

Ever facing her destiny

By: NAILA FRANCIS The Intelligencer

Some might say world-renowned violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn dreamed her way to owning the legendary 1720 Red Mendelssohn Stradivarius that is as much a defining element of her career as is her artistry.

By now, the violin has taken on a personality of its own.

As Elizabeth Pitcairn recalls her Verizon Hall debut at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts earlier this year, she speaks of it affectionately, the legendary \$1.7 million Red Mendelssohn Stradivarius that she has owned since the age of 16 more companion than iconic instrument.

"It was really, really exciting. The violin absolutely loved playing in that hall. I did, too, but the Strad went crazy," says Pitcairn, laughingly recalling their mutual exhilaration at playing in such an acoustically impressive space. "It's like taking your Porsche out to the Autobahn and saying, 'Here you go, it's wide open.' "

This November, on Thanksgiving Day, it will be exactly 20 years since Pitcairn has owned the violin, the one that served as inspiration for Francois Girard's Oscar-winning 1998 film "The Red Violin," and which was a gift from her grandfather. But even after having built a career as a celebrated violin virtuoso, performing with orchestras across the globe, the Bucks County native is still enthralled by the mysterious and beautiful instrument.

"I was a very lucky soul," she says, speaking recently from her home in Los Angeles. "My first instrument was a very inexpensive violin, but when I was 14, I got a very fine Italian violin (a Guadagnini). What I was playing on was the finest violin you could get before you go into the category of Stradivarius, but there's a huge jump between them and nothing in between. + (The Stradivarius) is just the ultimate in performance.

"We're such a partnership. When I'm really, really on, it does its absolute best for me. I feel like I was given this gift and the only thing holding me back from everything I dream of is me."

And Pitcairn's dreams are definitely not the small, run-of-the mill variety.

The effervescent musician grew up in Tinicum, the daughter of Juilliard-trained cellist Mary Pitcairn, founder of the Lenape Chamber Ensemble, and baritone Laren Pitcairn, past president of the Opera Company of Philadelphia and now vice chairman of the Academy of Vocal Arts board of directors.

Born of such musical roots, it seemed only natural that, at age 3, she expressed a desire to play the violin, having become entranced with the instrument, according to her mother's recollection, after watching her mom rehearse one day as part of a trio.

"It was the first time I had seen a violin up close and she said I was glued to the violin and when they were done (rehearsing), I announced that I wanted to play that," says Pitcairn. "My mom probably would've chosen the cello for me because that's what she plays, but it's funny how children know what they like. Today, the violin - that's it for me. It's the instrument that I absolutely love."

She was similarly clear and determined when, at age 8, she realized that her future belonged on a concert stage. The epiphany came on the hour-long car ride home from her violin lessons in Jenkintown while listening to a recording of David Oistrakh performing Jean Sibelius' "Violin Concerto in D Minor" with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

"I used to ask to listen to that every single time I was in the car," recalls Pitcairn. "I would just lie there and close my eyes and I would dream that was me playing that. I was doing creative visualization as a child and I didn't even know it. It was so vivid. It's the most difficult concerto ever written probably. It's so beautiful and filled with tension + and incredibly rhythmic and driving and energetic. It's the most magnificent piece."

Pitcairn will perform the concerto on Saturday, as a guest of the Bucks County Symphony Orchestra, during its final concert of the season, under the direction of Gary Fagin. It will be the first time she's performed it since 1994, though she still recalls what a struggle it was to learn the piece before her first presentation of it with the National Repertory Orchestra at age 24 - an entire 10 years past the age by which her mother had predicted she'd be able to play it.

"My dream finally came true then," she says. "When my mom said, 'You can play it at 14,' it seemed like forever, but 14 came and went and I'd look at the music and it was so hard. But it was worth the wait. Now I'm on a whole different level than I was when I was 24 because I have continued to work and improve and grow and learn as a musician and I'm actually beginning to feel that it's easy."

Given such a determined attitude, it should come as no surprise that when she announced, at 16, that she wanted a Stradivarius, within a few months, she was holding one in her hands. Pitcairn just never expected it to be that Stradivarius, though as soon as her mother heard that the famed 1720 violin, created by Italian violin maker Antonio Stradivari during his Golden Period of craftsmanship, would be auctioned off at Christie's of London, the family began planning their part in the bidding process.

It was 1990, and her mom whisked her to London for a quick 24 hours - the first time either of them had been to Europe - to see the violin before it went on the auction block. Pitcairn was even invited to play it and instantly fell in love.

"When I saw it, it was glowing red at me. It was so gorgeous," she recalls. "I was in this room with people milling all around and I was in my own

world."

The family designated Bob Ames, a New Jersey bow maker and friend, as the bidder at the auction that took place on Thanksgiving Day. When the violin sold for what at the time was an auction record for a musical instrument, it quickly disappeared - secretly shuttled to America and into Pitcairn's waiting hands, where its fate would remain a mystery until just about the time she made her professional debut as a soloist with the New York String Orchestra at Lincoln Center.

She was encouraged by her parents to keep the Stradivarius' whereabouts a secret - a wise decision, she now notes, as it never overshadowed her rising career (she wasn't even allowed to bring it with her to her freshman dorm at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, where she studied with preeminent violin professor Robert Lipsett, just one of her many teachers who would also include the renowned Jascha Brodsky and Shmuel Ashkenasi).

Today, given its enigmatic history, she still feels a haunted presence while playing it. The Red Mendelssohn disappeared shortly after Stradivari completed it in his small shop in Cremona. It resurfaced more than two centuries later, purchased in 1945 by a wealthy businessman who acquired it from a descendant of legendary composer Felix Mendelssohn in Berlin and who would also anonymously put the Red Violin on the auction block at Christie's in 1990. In Berlin, the instrument had been played by Lilli von Mendelssohn, who is shown holding it in a photo that Pitcairn has on her website. She and her husband, composer Emil Bohnke, were killed in a car accident in 1928. She was 31, he was 39.

"She was killed two weeks after that photograph was taken," says Pitcairn. "With the violin, you just feel this 300 years of presence. You don't know who it might have been with or where it might have been and who's played on it and what it's seen and what it might have heard. Sometimes, the hair tickles on the back of my neck when I play certain things."

Yet for all the instrument's mythical qualities and the sense of destiny she feels in claiming it, Pitcairn acknowledges she would not be where she is without tremendous discipline and dedication. It began when she was a child, the weekly long drives to her lessons (after Jenkintown, she took them in North Jersey and Wilmington, Del.) followed by busy Saturdays spent attending the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra rehearsals and then receiving her chamber music training with Temple University's Center for Gifted Young Musicians. By her senior year at Solebury School, she was constantly missing class for various concert performances and competitions.

Yet somehow, she still had time for sports, ballet classes, horseback riding and the other activities that her parents never tried to curtail.

"I think that's why I mentally survived this challenging upbringing because of all the other aspects of life (my mother) let me experience because I'm so exuberant and active and love sports that my spirit would have been broken without that," says Pitcairn, who also teaches at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles and is a concertmaster with Southern California's New West Symphony.

Today, she still practices an average of four hours daily (her record, set in college, was 13 hours in one day) and admits that, at 36, her body is beginning to feel the wear and tear of the rigors of her profession. But put her on the stage, and all else fades, including the throbbing thumbs and tingling fingers, the tired legs and aching arms.

"There's a healing quality when you do something that's so profound. It starts from within and takes you away from this world," says Pitcairn, who will return to Philadelphia in October to perform as part of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society's Museum Recital Series. "When it's over, I feel like I've been given this fresh start and everything's been wiped clean and I feel this sense of profound calm inside + and the audience just forgets all their cares and goes along on that journey with you."

Elizabeth Pitcairn will perform as part of the Bucks County Symphony Orchestra's final season concert on Saturday at Central Bucks East High School, 2804 Holicong Road, Buckingham. Show time: 8 p.m. Tickets: in advance, \$18; at the door, \$20; seniors, \$15; students, free. Information: 215-348-7321; www.buckscountysymphony.org.

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