

String sensation

Saint Joseph Symphony presents 'The Red Violin' at Missouri Theater

By [Blake Hannon](#)

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Renowned violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn will join the Saint Joseph Symphony for a performance of "The Red Violin" on Saturday, March 27 at the Missouri Theater.

World-renowned violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn didn't always own one of the most legendary stringed instruments ever made.

When she was growing up in northern Pennsylvania, her mother took her to a violin shop to get her first real instrument when she was 5 years old. At that age, she admits she had different criteria than she does today.

"I wanted the pretty looking (red) one and she wanted this one that was yellow and sounded good," Pitcairn says. "I guess it turns out I got the red one that sounds good later in life."

The "red one" happens to be the 1720 Red Mendelssohn Stradivarius violin, whose creation and history became the inspiration for the 1999 film "The Red Violin." Now, both the instrument and Pitcairn's virtuosic skill are coming to our area to perform with the Saint Joseph Symphony for its concert "The Red Violin," taking place at 7:30 p.m. March 27 at the Missouri Theater.

To get a sense of the prestige behind the instrument, it helps to know where it came from. The violin was created by Antonio Stradivari, an Italian violin maker whose instruments brought the richness, power and tone of violins to unsurpassed levels. The 1720 Red Mendelssohn Stradivarius violin was created during Stradivari's Golden Period, when he made some of his most legendary and prized creations.

"When it comes to violins, Stradivarius is considered the gold standard, and this particular instrument is considered one of the best he made," says Derrick Hinds, executive director of the Saint Joseph Symphony.

Much of the instrument's journey remains a mystery. It resurfaced in the 1900s and found its way into the hands of an heir to the legendary composer Felix Mendelssohn and a New York industrialist, who made a point to keep the instrument in near-perfect condition.

But when it was auctioned off at Christie's of London in 1990, it then found a permanent owner in a 16-year-old violinist named Elizabeth Pitcairn. Pitcairn, who grew up with a Julliard-trained cellist mother and father who sang baritone, was trained to play violin since age 3 and came under the tutelage of some of the country's premier violin instructors.

The violin was a gift from her grandfather, and upon hearing it Pitcairn immediately knew what made the

instrument so special.

“I knew it had everything. It had a very rich low end, a beautiful end,” she says. “It was like a dream violin. I couldn’t believe it ... still can’t believe it.”

Now, Pitcairn takes the Red Violin and performs as a featured soloist with some of the best orchestras around the world. Her upcoming performance with the Saint Joseph Symphony came thanks to a friendship with the orchestra’s musical director, Rico McNeela, whom she met at a chamber music festival in Lake Luzerne, N.Y. McNeela says that getting Pitcairn to come to St. Joseph will be a treat for classical music fans.

“She’s just this great balance of soloistic skills and musical talent, an insight that all the great soloists have,” he says. “It’s my thought that her visit here is going to be the highlight of the season.”

Pitcairn will perform on two of the four pieces of music in “The Red Violin” program. The first composition, Antonin Dvorak’s “Romance Op. 11,” showcases the violin’s lyrical beauty and sensitivity. The other is Max Bruch’s “Violin Concerto No. 1 Op. 26,” an exciting, driving piece that puts Pitcairn’s skills on full display.

“She certainly has fingers to burn,” McNeela says. “This will show her at her technical best.”

Other pieces will include the rousing opener by Gioachino Rossini, “L’Italiana in Algeri,” and Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 1,” which McNeela says highlights the moment the famous composer began to find his own distinctive voice.

In a way, that’s what people are going to get to hear more than anything when they see “The Red Violin”: an instrument with a voice that speaks volumes and a player able to effectively bring it out.

“The violin has such a definitive personality. It becomes a part of you and you become a part of it,” Pitcairn says. “The amazing thing is it just continues to evolve. As I evolve as a player, so does the violin. We’re very connected.”

Tickets for “The Red Violin” are \$10 to \$40. For more information, call 233-7701 or visit www.saintjosephsymphony.org.