

# Barbara Neal Varma

## Kindred Spirits

*Acclaimed violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn continues the journey of the Red Violin*

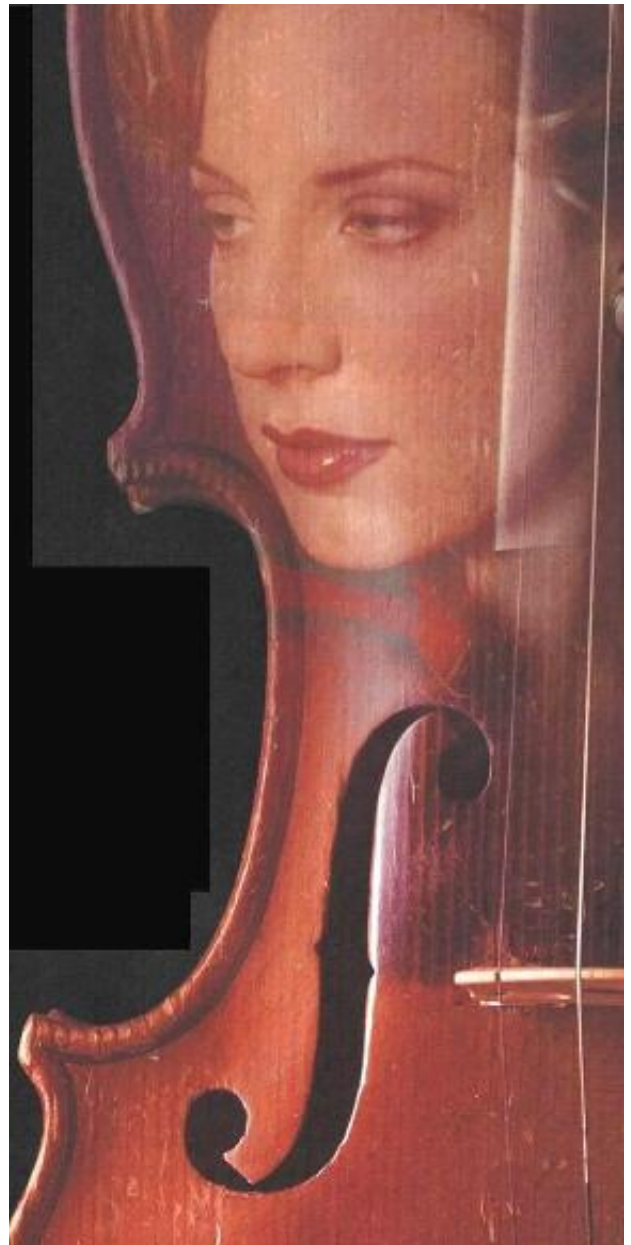
*by Barbara Neal Varma*

**V**iolin virtuoso Elizabeth Pitcairn describes the experience of playing her Mendelssohn Stradivarius—the inspiration for Francois Girard's Oscar-winning 1999 film *The Red Violin*—as one that "takes you away from this world." The 36-year-old Pennsylvania native turned Southern California girl says when a performance is over, she feels a profound sense of calm. "There's this amazing thing that happens in your soul. The music...it just washes over you, takes away all your fears and worries."

No doubt the thousands of audience members lulled into a dream state by the hypnotic beauty of her music would agree.

After more than 20 years of performing at some of the world's most renowned concert halls, the sought-after soloist and her famed violin still put in an average of four hours practice a day. As Girard's movie alludes, "I believe the spirits and souls of all the people through the years are in the instrument," she said. "What intrigues me most is what pieces it [the Red Violin] knows. I feel like it has a voice and can tell me what happened."

The classical violinist, also a member of the distinguished faculty at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles, and concertmaster with So Cal's New West Symphony, calls the City of Angels her home. "I'm a person with strong ties to both coasts but my base these days is Los Angeles." She remembers waving goodbye to her mom and, in a tangible sense, her childhood before boarding a plane bound for USC her freshman year. Since then Pitcairn has been happily set in the city. "I love L.A. more than ever. There are so many interesting people, from film, from media—everyone, actually."



The homestead she left to go west was woodsy and rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Her mother is Juilliard-trained cellist Mary Pitcairn, founder of the Lenape Chamber Ensemble in Philadelphia, and her father is baritone Laren Pitcairn, past president of Philly's Opera Company, now vice chairman of the Academy of Vocal Arts board of directors.

Elizabeth Pitcairn's musical heritage came with all the accessories and obligations one might expect: by the time she was a senior in high school she was performing professionally and had already completed music training at Temple University's Center for Gifted Young Musicians. Pitcairn studied with expert violin professor Robert Lipsett and master violinist Jascha Brodsky, among others.

But perhaps her greatest teacher has been the Stradivarius itself. The proud owner talks of the Red Violin as if it were more mentor than musical instrument. "We've been together almost twenty years now," she said. "It's my best friend and partner."

Pitcairn's parents first saw their daughter's musical proclivity at the age of 3 when the toddler Elizabeth watched, fascinated, as her mother played a violin during an afternoon rehearsal. Mom usually chose the cello-and some might think that's where her child's attention would lean to, but on this day Mary Pitcairn had the smaller string instrument in hand-and soon in her daughter's heart. When the rehearsal was over, she recalls, her wide-eyed daughter announced she wanted to "play that."

At 8 years old, Pitcairn realized another desire: to perform as a soloist on stage, an epiphany that grew from listening to a recording of David Oistrakh playing Sibelius's Violin Concerto in D Minor on the car radio to and from music lessons. "I used to ask to listen to that every single time I was in the car," she recently told *The Intelligencer*. "I would just lie there and close my eyes and I would dream that was me playing."

Her grandfather set that dream into motion when he discreetly bought the by-then legendary violin for his granddaughter when she was just 16 years old. Her parents had previously equipped her with some "very fine instruments," she said, including an Italian Guadagnini, "but the Stradivarius is the ultimate in performance."

And the Red Mendelssohn is the ultimate in the dwindling Stradivarius collection. Lovingly handmade by Antonio Stradivari in 1720, during what historians refer to as his gold period of craftsmanship, the violin pulled a disappearing act on the musical world for

more than 200 years. It resurfaced in 1930s Berlin in the collection of an heir of the composer Felix Mendelssohn. It's unknown whether the music master ever laid hands on the instrument, but photographs show his descendants playing informal parlor performances as a family quartet. In one photo, a seated Lilli von Mendelssohn, violinist and great granddaughter to the composer, checks her sheet music. Posed on her lap is the Red Violin.



Burke In 1945 a New York industrialist and collector of fine objects purchased the Stradivarius at auction and kept it for nearly half a century in pristine performance condition, if private use and display only. In 1990, when Mary Pitcairn heard the by-then mythical "Mendelssohn Red Stradivarius," so named because of its original burnished red varnish, would be auctioned off at Christie's, she began planning the family's participation in the bidding.

The rest is the stuff Hollywood dreams are made of. According to news reports, the venerable violin was purchased on November 22 (Thanksgiving Day) in 1990, for \$1.7 million, a then record amount for a musical instrument at auction. As the winning bidder, Pitcairn's grandfather was reported to be "an American who does not want to be identified," although the New York Times did state the Stradivarius would be in the hands of "a young woman who is a professional violinist."

In 1998, Francois Girard co-wrote, directed and debuted his movie, *The Red Violin*, following the two-hundred-year-old Stradivarius on its historic journey through the hands of its known-and imagined-owners, or "partners," Pitcairn might say. When the movie was released, she was still the anonymous owner of the film's star performer. Her parents had encouraged her to keep the treasure hidden until her career caught up with the notoriety of the instrument.

Finally, in the year 2000, Pitcairn and the Red Violin made her New York debut with the New York String Orchestra at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall. In that same year she appeared as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Academy of Music. Pitcairn had brought the legendary instrument out of seclusion after more than 21 decades, and in her nimble hands, it sang.

"This past February I performed at the new Verizon Hall in Philadelphia-it's a wonderful venue acoustically-and the violin went insane," she said, recalling how she was suddenly, easily able to "pull sound" straight from its core.

"The reverberations, the overtones were incredible-like someone opened the floodgates and it just let loose. We both felt it." She often uses the personified plural when referring to herself and her fabled fiddle: "The Strad and I grew professionally together. Ultimately it bears the stamp of my personality."

Also in 2000, Pitcairn returned to her So Cal West coast home to play for an audience of 5,000, her largest at the time. What drew the crowds was the chance to hear the rising talent play the Red Violin Chaconne composed for the film by John Corigliano. It was the So Cal premiere of the premier piece from the movie, and Pitcairn was only the third person to perform it. "I was invited to play the chaconne one year after it had won the award. I hadn't even seen the movie yet-I'm always practicing," she admits with a laugh, "so I rented the film to get a better idea. I loved the piece."

Since then, her accolades and accomplishments-as well as her and the Red Violin's notoriety-have grown.

Following their historic debut in Southern California, the dynamic duo have performed in concert halls and an assortment of musical venues around the globe, a vision come true for the one-time small-town girl: "My dream is to travel the world through my violin and share my music with others."

Especially other starry-eyed high school musical kids just starting out. "My number one passion is young performers and sharing my music with them." Pitcairn is forming a foundation to raise money for children in the musical arts who might not otherwise have the means to attend music camp or other specialized study. "I usually end up in a city for close to a week so I go into a school and do a performance for the students."

Pitcairn believes the lessons learned from devoting oneself to a goal or task are applicable to all areas of life. "Even if the kids aren't going to be musicians there's so much to learn from having a discipline. I tell them, sometimes you don't feel like practicing but you do it anyway. Whatever it is you do or want to do, try to be the best at it."

Her own upbringing included other essentials beyond the often rigorous schedule kept by any aspiring apprentice. Mom made sure her daughter's childhood was not limited to the practice, practice, practice to make her perfect. Amid the rehearsals and long drives in between, there were plenty of "just a kid having fun"-type adventures. Pitcairn recalls summers spent horseback riding, and winter breaks learning how to ski. "I'm still a pretty decent skier," she says. "I have to be to keep up with my brother."

The classical musician's music tastes are just as varied. Sure, she enjoyed the concertos played one after the other on the car radio but a teen-age Elizabeth's first record albums featured The Beatles, Prince and Michael Jackson. One of her current fav groups is an Indy rock band, and, no surprise, the classical violinist who can also catch a smooth riff on Red, "loves great jazz."

Pitcairn is grateful she had parents who were willing to let teens be teens-even when said teen was a musical girl wonder. "Mom was great," Pitcairn said. "She drove me to all my lessons, she'd sit and practice with me, but she let me also do all kinds of sports."

But all passions and paths inevitably lead back to her music. Recently she collaborated with Lionsgate Films for the 10th anniversary re-release of The Red Violin DVD - Meridian Collection with bonus documentary interviews by Pitcairn and Corigliano, the score's composer. She is featured performing on her beloved Strad and discussing the inspiring history of the mysterious instrument.

Pitcairn is proud of the fact that with all the souls who've played the Stradivarius over the years, she's the first one to bring it to the stage, to let it realize its destiny as she discovers hers. "Francois Gerard, who directed the film, said I was continuing the journey of the Red Violin, but it's more like it's taking me," Pitcairn said. "And I want to bring the audience on that journey with me."