



Elizabeth Pitcairn soars with red violin

By Alan Markoff - February 21, 2016

Classical violin soloist Elizabeth Pitcairn wowed the audience playing her famous red violin at her Cayman Arts Festival performance Saturday night at the Cayman Islands Baptist Church in Savannah.

The American-born violinist was accompanied on piano by her childhood friend, Cayman Arts Festival Artistic Director Glen Inanga, whom she met when they were both 14 and attended the same music camp at the Luzerne Music Center in New York.

The pair performed two sets, the first comprising two sonatas, one by Mozart and one by Debussy.

“It’s one of my all-time favorite pieces,” she said of Debussy’s 1917 “Sonata in G Minor.”

After the intermission, Ms. Pitcairn took time to talk about her red Stradivarius violin, which was made in 1720, the final year of Antonio Stradivari’s golden period of violin making.

The violin, which is said to have inspired the 1998 film “The Red Violin,” was purchased for her at a Christie’s London auction in 1990 when she was only 16 years old.

“At the time, no violin had sold for as much as a million dollars and the reserve price was \$1.2 million,” she said, adding that the violin eventually sold for more than \$1.6 million on the very last bid.

Ms. Pitcairn said she did not have the violin with her during her first years at college.

“My mother didn’t think it was a good idea to keep it in my college dorm room,” she said laughing. “But [the violin] has been with me ever since.”

She explained that the violin has undergone many modifications and repairs over its almost 300 years, but much of the original body – including all of the back – is the original maple from Bosnia.

In the hands of such an accomplished musician, the violin, which was made for the largest 18th century concert halls of Europe, soared in the small church venue, where even the most delicate of notes had power and grace.

She said she calls the violin “Felix” because it was owned by German composer Felix Mendelssohn, a sonata from whom she played after intermission.

“It’s not often played in concert,” she said of the 1838 “Sonata in F Major,” “but I heard it once in concert and fell in love with it.”

Other pieces she played after the intermission included John Corigliano’s “The Red Violin Chaconne,” which came from the film; “It Ain’t Necessarily So” from the opera “Porgy and Bess”; and finally, the technically difficult “Hora Staccato,” which Ms. Pitcairn said required her to develop “a twitch” to properly perform.

In a rarity in classical concert performances, Ms. Pitcairn fielded questions from the audience before playing her final songs.

One question she was asked dealt with how she avoided repetitive stress injuries and Ms. Pitcairn admitted that as she has gotten older, she’s had to deal with injuries from her playing posture and the fact that playing a violin is very angular to begin with. She said that four years ago she started going to a chiropractor. That began her healing process and she continues to improve. She said that many musicians have similar problems.

“Many musicians have to play through pain,” she said.

The Cayman Arts Festival runs this week, with events every day, culminating with the performance of Moroccan-born percussionist Mokhtar Samba and large band on Friday at the First Baptist Church.