

# Red Violin fills Rocky with sound

## RMHS students inspired by historic notes

12:42 AM, Sep. 23, 2011



Violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn plays a song Thursday for students at Rocky Mountain High School. Pitcairn played her 1720 Stradivarius, which is known as the Mendelssohn Red Violin, one of only 600 Stradivarius violins still in existence today and perhaps the most famous. The instrument is worth about \$10 million. / V. Richard Haro/The Coloradoan

Written by

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As Elizabeth Pitcairn delicately raised a nearly 300-year-old violin to her cheek Thursday afternoon, an entire auditorium of high school students fell eerily silent.

Pitcairn played her 1720 Stradivarius, the Mendelssohn Red Violin, with a grace that made even the most complex tunes seem effortless to her captive audience at Rocky Mountain High School.

"From the first note, I had goose bumps," said Haley Uzelac, a sophomore tenor saxophone player at RMHS. "I still have goose bumps."

Riley Hill, a sophomore violinist at RMHS, said he felt incredibly blessed to hear and see the 1720 Stradivarius that has earned so much historical attention.

"I was speechless to be in the presence of something that great," Hill said.

Pitcairn's violin is one of only 600 Stradivarius violins still in existence today and is most famous for its 200-year disappearance until it resurfaced in Berlin in the 1930s.

The instrument, which has been in her possession since she was 16, has a rich and mysterious history that has cultivated much speculation, inspiring a 1998 film, "The Red Violin."

"She is one of those rare people who has in her possession one of the rarest of violins," said Fort Collins Symphony conductor Wes Kenney. "That movie was pure fiction, but that instrument is not."

The historic instrument fell into her hands on Thanksgiving Day 1990 after she secretly won it in a Christie's auction in London.

"No one knew in the whole world where the violin went except those closest to me," Pitcairn said. "Thanksgiving has a special meaning for me to this day."

The violin, valued in the 1930s around \$30,000, is now worth \$10 million. Its famous red color comes from the varnish process that its maker, Antonio Stradivari, crafted in Cremona, Italy.

"So I try not to drop it," she joked.

As the young soloist bonded with the violin, she unwittingly began playing music from "The Red Violin," not learning until later that it was her instrument that inspired the movie.

Now she and the Red Violin travel throughout the United States and the world to share the instrument's story and Pitcairn's skillful music.

Pitcairn stopped at Rocky Mountain High School to impress one thing upon the musicians of the future: Never give up.

"(Music) is one of the hardest things you can do in life," she said. "My life is a lot of hard work behind the scenes and the great part, like playing for you, is what makes it all worth it."

The famous virtuoso said she still practices the basics daily and takes the painstaking time to achieve perfection in her music.

"We have to play on a level of perfection that most people can't perceive of," Pitcairn said. "Except maybe neurologists."

But beyond practicing, Pitcairn encouraged students to have a well-rounded life, even as a musician.

During her time at the University of Southern California, she said she joined a sorority and went to almost every football game. While it delayed her career slightly, Pitcairn said she wouldn't change a thing.

"It's important to have a well-rounded life as a musician," she said. "I don't think a lot of soloists got the kind of life I had."