

Stradivarius-toting violin virtuoso, Elizabeth Pitcairn, happy to play Saginaw Bay Symphony Orchestra concert

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By **Sue White** | The Saginaw News



Courtesy

Violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn

SAGINAW — “My life’s dream,” said violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn, “was always to see the world with my violin.”

And when she starts talking about the Swedish Grammy Awards — she was nominated for her recording of Tommie Haglund’s “Hymns to the Night” — and upcoming performances in Hong Kong and Finland and the violin fair in Italy that became a pilgrimage of sorts with her 1720 “Red Mendelssohn” Stradivarius in hand, her dream seems to be reality.

So what’s bringing her back to Saginaw’s Temple Theatre, where she again will join the Saginaw Bay Symphony Orchestra for “A Night with Elizabeth Pitcairn” on Saturday?

The concert, playing on the themes of love and loss, will feature Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 6, Sibelius’ Violin Concerto and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon’s “blue cathedral,” paying homage to her late brother. Andrew Du Comb, who was recently named the 2011 Young Musician of the Year, will made his Saginaw concert debut.

“I really appreciate, at a crucial time in my career, that Patrick Flynn gave me the opportunity to play with the Saginaw Bay Symphony Orchestra,” Pitcairn said of her 2006 concert. “We were very close — I had soloed with his orchestra in Los Angeles — and when he asked me a second time, I readily agreed.”

But before the date came around in 2009, “it was so sad, Patrick had passed away,” she remembered. “I did come

back, though, performing with Andre Raphael Smith, which was very special. He was the director of the Philadelphia Orchestra during a key performance there, when I was 22.”

And this time, “it’s my gift to Saginaw,” she said. “I’m so thrilled, to perform with Brett Mitchell in his first season there, to work with young people again, and to be back in a place where the whole community is so supportive of its orchestra.

“Saginaw is a great place, with a wonderful orchestra.”

It’s a weekend that’s bringing back a lot of memories, said Pitcairn, whose mother was a Juilliard-trained cellist. Pitcairn took up the violin when she was 3, she said, “and my family says I was watching others play it when I was 2. They said I was glued to the violin and I wanted to play.”

She was only 16 when she went to Christie’s auction house and first held the Stradivarius, a violin that inspired the film, “The Red Violin.” Shortly after, her grandfather made a successful bid, and she has since drawn accolades from around the world for the emotion she draws from the strings, using notes as tools, one said, in creating her music.

“I was just reliving that yesterday,” Pitcairn said. “We were talking about the auction, and I remembered how I was given permission to hold it. It was glowing red and an elderly gentleman brought it to me. I didn’t even have to play it to appreciate what it offered.”

You have to remember, she said, that the violin was built at a time when Europe began building the massive concert halls, and Stradivari needed an instrument powerful enough to project its sound. Even today, she said, she performs without a microphone and it carries throughout the theater.

It’s not the only instrument from its day to come with a story, she added. There’s also the Red Diamond, a violin built in 1732 that was swept by a wave in California from a concertmaster’s car into the ocean in 1953. It was retrieved and restored — “The case and the varnish protected it,” she said — and still commands attention in performance.

“I’ve adored Europe,” she said of her travels there. “Musicians are the same all over the world; there’s a wonderful vibe.”

And that’s true, too, she said, of the young people she meets along the way.

“There’s such joy in lending my instrument to a young artist, someone I know will appreciate it, and watching them play. I let quite a few people play on it.”

Pitcairn had certain advantages growing up, she admitted. She had the chance to play a Stradivarius when she was

Preview

- What: “A Night with Elizabeth Pitcairn”
- When: 8 p.m. Saturday, March 26
- Where: Temple Theatre, 203 N. Washington, Saginaw
- Tickets: \$36, \$31, \$11 adults; \$16, \$6 students
- Info: (989) 754-SHOW

12, "and I can still hear it in my head. A good violin changes your concept of sound; I'm still trying to re-create what I heard.

"But success still comes down to how you play off what you have. Perseverance is everything. All musicians go through the same thing, and it's not only in the moment of performance."

Whether young people play or go on with another profession, music is one of the greatest disciplines they'll undertake, she said, and they can apply it to anything they do in the future.

"And the emotional context of the music, it will inspire them, whether they're professional or not," she added.

Parents often ask Pitcairn how they'll know if their children have the real thing, and she tells them, "I never wanted to quit playing. Practice is often hard for a child, but if they absolutely hate it, take that into consideration.

"But don't be quick to stop it if they just want to step away. A lot of people tell me, 'I wish I had continued.' With so many distractions, a child may not want to put the time in practice, but still make it available."

It's a mission she takes to heart, becoming even more involved as she takes leadership of a summer camp in upstate New York.

"Before the man who ran the camp passed away, he told his wife he wanted me to take it over for him when he died," Pitcairn said. "There's a wonderful faculty and staff, and it means I can spend two months ... working with young people. This is a major career development for me, and at this point in my life, I have this amazing background that I'm able to share."

It's an opportunity, she said, that she traces back to the time she worked with the Mehta family and served as concertmaster for four years, from 9 a.m. to noon every Saturday.

"If I hadn't been very supportive of what they were doing, showing up every Saturday for four years, I wouldn't have the opportunities that have opened to me since," she said. "That's the kind of thing it takes, making an investment in your future, to reach this point."

And investing in a violin with a history didn't hurt. Is the legend true? Did its maker use the blood of his wife, who died in childbirth, to give the violin its red color?

"The film is based on history," she said. "There's no way we'll ever know for sure, but it makes a good story."