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## **Pitcairn, ASO, 'Red Violin' are passionate partners**

By Steve Siegel, Special to The Morning Call

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It's more like a partnership than a solo career, a love affair rather than a musical performance. When violin virtuoso Elizabeth Pitcairn cradles her legendary 1720 "Red Mendelssohn" Stradivarius, she's communing with a soul mate and best friend.

No other musical instrument is shrouded in such mystery and intrigue, and Pitcairn, each time she performs on it, adds a bit more history to its mostly unknown past. On Nov. 12 and 13, more of its history will be written when Pitcairn joins the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Diane Wittry, to perform Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2. Also on the program is the world premiere of "Caprice" by 14 year-old Rory Lipkis, and Brahms' Symphony No. 3.



Pitcairn, a Bucks County native, started playing the violin at the age of 3, and performed her first concerto with an orchestra at 14. She made her New York debut at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in 2000, and since then has appeared as soloist with orchestras worldwide, now performing about 50 concerts a year. She is currently a faculty member at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles, where she teaches alongside her former instructor, Robert Lipsett.

Pitcairn's mesmerizing, crimson-colored instrument was a gift from her grandfather, purchased at the 1990 Christie's auction which is said to have inspired the 1999 Academy Award-winning film, "The Red Violin." The violin vanished soon after its creation in Antonio Stradivarius' small shop in Cremona, Italy. No one knows where it was or to whom it belonged for more than 200 years, inspiring Canadian filmmaker Francois Girard to speculate on its mysterious history in an electrifying tale of drama, love, and passion.

The "Red Mendelssohn" would eventually surface in 1930s Germany, having been purchased

by a member of the Berlin banking family who were descendants of the composer Felix Mendelssohn, after which it is named. Pitcairn is the first known solo artist ever to have played the instrument in a concert hall. In fact, the last woman who reportedly ever played it was Lilli von Mendelssohn, in 1925.

"Christie's had a dated photograph of Lilli performing on it along with other members of her family," says Pitcairn, who was only 16 years old when she flew to London with her mother to view the violin for the first time. "I had special permission from the auction house to try it for 20 minutes. My first memory was seeing this elderly gentleman cradling it — it was glowing red, the most beautiful violin I had ever seen. Even though there were many people milling about, I was in my own world, listening to the incredible sound coming out of it."

The first notes Pitcairn played on the instrument were from the opening of Tchaikovsky's violin concerto. "I had been working on that at the time, so that's what I played. What better piece to pull the full sound out of a violin?" she says. And there was that color. "What's really interesting is the red pigment, which Stradivarius started putting on his instruments later in life. That was breaking the mold of tradition — it had never been done before," says Pitcairn. She talks about the violin and its famous auction in a documentary on Lionsgate Films' 2009 remastered DVD of the movie.

Pitcairn last appeared with the ASO in 2005, when she performed John Corigliano's "Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra," the moving finale of his Oscar-winning score for "The Red Violin," played by Joshua Bell in the film.

Corigliano himself heard Pitcairn play the piece, not in Allentown, but in Connecticut, where Diane Wittry was conducting the Norwalk Symphony orchestra. "It turns out Norwalk is right next to Westport, where John grew up," says Pitcairn. She wasted no time in establishing a correspondence with Corigliano, and he eventually did a four-day residency at the Luzerne Music Center in upstate New York where she is president and artistic director.

The Prokofiev concerto, composed in 1935, will be as much a debut for Pitcairn as it will be for her violin — neither has performed it before. In a way, the work will cast the pair not as instrument and performer, but as dance partners.

"It's very much ballet-like. I'm absolutely in love with it. There are things in it that remind me of his ballet 'Romeo and Juliet,' which I was exposed to when quite young, performing it with the Philadelphia Youth Orchestra," Pitcairn says. "I really feel the ballet influence in his style, so I always had a soft spot for Prokofiev. I looked up the chronology, and he actually wrote 'Romeo and Juliet' right after the second violin concerto."

Pitcairn's sound is at once powerful and sensitive, a blend that comes not only from her own athleticism — she does strength training exercises almost every week for two hours a day, in addition to her daily four hours of practice — but from the violin's own voice. "The sound can reach the back row of a concert hall like a rocket. It's in big concert halls where it really shows off," she says.

But it's not just about power, it's about soul, and both are reflected in the dualistic nature she feels in the violin. "I call my instrument 'Felix.' But it's haunted by the soul of a woman, since it was Lilli Mendelssohn who played it last. So I think of it more as a masculine entity with a female soul," she says.

"Sometimes when I look at it, I see the marks where someone's chin has rubbed away the varnish. That's really cool, like there's a soul in there. But it really comes to life when you play it, that's when you feel the music pouring out of it."

When she's not giving concerts or teaching, Pitcairn's schedule is filled with outreach activities, including benefits, school visits, and summer residencies. "I can trace the whole development of my fundraisers, educational outreach and charity work for classical music organizations back to the ASO asking me to perform in the home of Lee Butz when I played with the orchestra in 2005," she says. "It was the first time I played in a setting like that, to all these donors and board members, and then talking about the pieces. Everybody loved it, so I kept on doing it. I guess it created a monster!"

Pitcairn's "Red Mendelssohn" is not the first Strad owned by her family. Her great uncle Raymond owned several at various times, including the 1707 "Hammer" Stradivarius that was auctioned at Christie's in 2006, selling for \$3.5 million, a then-record price for a musical instrument.

"That's kind of the one that started our search for the Mendelssohn. We had got this call from a dealer asking if we were interested in a Stradivarius that was owned by my uncle. He came by and showed it to us, but then the Mendelssohn came up right after that," Pitcairn says. "That was strange, how the 'Hammer' was the first Strad to come into my life, then I ended up with the Mendelssohn."

Pitcairn was reunited with the "Hammer" in May of 2006, when she was invited to play it at a press conference given by Christie's before the auction. Was it much different?

"The 'Hammer' was a great violin. It had been played for the past 10 years by Kyoko Takezawa. I believe when a violin is played by a great artist it just gets better — it resonates in a certain way, and the 'Hammer' really sounded great," Pitcairn says. "But the Mendelssohn just had this mystique about it. I just felt this connection to it. And, of course, the 'Hammer' wasn't red."

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**ALLENTOWN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, 'RETURN OF THE RED VIOLIN'**

- What:** Elizabeth Pitcairn performs Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in a concert that also features a world premiere by 14 year-old Rory Lipkis and Brahms' Symphony No. 3.
- When:** 8 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday
- Where:** Symphony Hall, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown
- How much:** \$25-\$45
- What else:** Brown-bag lunch with Pitcairn and conductor Diane Wittry, noon Nov. 11. Free, bring lunch.
- Info:** 610-432-6715, <http://www.allentownsymphony.org>

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