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## Pitcairn and her red violin gutsy, passionate, with ASO



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By Steve Siegel Special to The Morning Call

On Saturday and Sunday at Allentown Symphony Hall, a very old violin shared the stage with a very young composer - not in the same piece, but on the same program. Each made beautiful music with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Diane Wittry.

The very old violin was the famed Red Mendelssohn Stradivarius of 1720, played by virtuoso **Elizabeth Pitcairn** in Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor. The very young composer was 14-year-old Rory Lipkis, whose composition "Caprice" received its world premiere. Also on the program was Brahms' Symphony No. 3, performed with an interesting return to a 19th-century seating plan, which put the cellos and bass strings on the left of the stage, and repositioned some of the second violins to the right.

Lipkis' "Caprice" was instantly likable, with a dramatic waltz-like opening that unfolds to reveal a colorful mixture of moods. Its plethora of clever themes creates something powerfully cinematic, and although the program notes tell us the composer had no particular storyline in mind, the piece delivers a delightful programmatic message. The interplay of orchestral sounds and variety of textures is stunning - the piece just begs for a film to accompany it.

Prokofiev, despite his desire to remain simple and accessible, took great pains not to make too many concessions to popular taste. His second violin concerto is a perfect example, and **Pitcairn's** performance, in the Sunday afternoon concert that I attended, splendidly brought out both its traditional and unorthodox qualities.

**Pitcairn**, who stands elegantly tall at 5' 10," played most of the first movement with a gutsy grittiness, highlighting the tension already suggested by the piece's minor key. Her passionately performed opening solo was followed by a romantic cantabile and a lovely duet with the cellos. The lyrical second movement was almost ballet-like as **Pitcairn**, now with a silkier voice, delivered the graceful opening theme before easing into numerous virtuosic passages. These were accompanied by string pizzicatos and delicate countermelodies in the woodwinds which, sad to say, sounded a bit ragged throughout the work.

Prokofiev is at his most radical in the final movement, a traditional rondo yet given a Stravinsky-like percussive edge due to its persistent long-short-long rhythm. There was a return to the tension of the first movement, as **Pitcairn** dug in for a more aggressive punch while the low strings and basses growled dramatically. Prokofiev's unorthodox surprises include duets which had **Pitcairn** dueling with the basses and even a bass drum at one point, then executing eerie glissandos before the strikingly dissonant conclusion.

The repositioned strings gave Brahms' third symphony a meaty, massive sound that added weight to its drama but did not overwhelm its tenderness. Happily, its opening chords, at times somber and joyous, ushered in the return of the woodwinds' composure, which had seemed lost in the Prokofiev. The gentle second movement was notable for some lovely solos by clarinetist John Schwartz, and the dreamlike, intensely lyrical third movement featured some sweet-toned work from oboists Erin Benholzer and Youan Lee, and bassoonists Susan Shaw and Lee Walck.

The well-rendered finale, resounding with solemn and stormy crescendos, nevertheless carried a happy message, and ended on a note of subdued self-satisfaction.