

Fiddling around at Strad Fest

The Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra is bringing eight of the world's rarest and most celebrated Stradivarius violins together for the first time in an unprecedented showcase called "Strad Fest LA," from March 26-29, featuring one private event and three public performances across town.

With only about 650 surviving Stradivarius violins, violas, cellos, harps and guitars in the world, this instrumental "dream team" features violins handcrafted during the Strad's "Golden Period" 300 years ago in Cremona, Italy, in the late 1600s and early 1700s.

The earliest "Serdet" from 1666; the 1708 "Ruby," known for its ruby-tinted varnish; and others named for their players, such as "Milstein" for violinist Nathan Milstein, and "Leonora Jackson" will be featured in performance.

A particular highlight is the 1720 "Red Mendelssohn," which surfaced in 1930s Berlin and was the inspiration for the 1999 Academy Award-winning film "The Red Violin" that speculated on the instrument's mysterious history after disappearing for more than 200 years following its debut (currently owned by Elizabeth Pitcairn).

Locally this "ex-strad-aganza" is called the "Stradivarius Fiddlefest" and takes place on Friday, March 28, 7:30 p.m. at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica. A once-in-a-lifetime fiddle "face-off" stars five of these violins played by world-class virtuosos who will be attempting to outplay one another in an acrobatic program of solos, duos, trios and quartets.

Performers include LACO's Margaret Batjer, piano superstar Jeffrey Kahane, with master fiddlers Chee-Yun, Cho-Liang Lin and Philippe Quint, with Nico Abondolo on double bass. Brahms, Kreisler, and the inimitable tango master Astor Piazzola are among the composers' works featured.

Superstar violinists on Strads: a truly historic, one-of-a-kind event. You should get tickets now. Call (213) 622-7001, ext. 1 or visit www.laco.org.