

## REVIEW

# Violinist dazzles in Brahms concerto

By Kari Sayers

You never know what you are going to get when you attend a Peninsula Symphony concert. Case in point: the orchestra's performance at Rolling Hills Covenant Church Sunday night, which was nontraditional in programming and extraordinary for a community orchestra in its high caliber of talent.

Maestro Gary Berkson, who just signed on with the symphony for another three years, saved the best for the last half of the concert, when violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn gave a magnificent performance of Johannes Brahms' Violin Concerto in D major, composed in 1878.

Pitcairn played on her 1720 Stradivarius "Red Violin," reportedly the subject of the 1998 movie "The Red Violin." It was a gift from her grandfather, Pitcairn explained before her performance, purchased for \$1.7 million at a Christie's auction in London in 1990, when Pitcairn was 17. The moniker comes from the red varnish the famed violin maker used only for his very best instruments.

Pitcairn made her fine instrument sing from the very first bars in the first allegro movement. She made it purr like a cat with a rich, full sound in the low range and warble like a nightingale in the high register, with clean trills, multiple stops, staccatos and vibratos.

The second adagio movement, with its gorgeous theme, was lyrical and dreamy against the subdued strings and woodwinds that created a soft carpet for the soloist to play on. The familiar final allegro movement was this reviewer's favorite, and Pitcairn finished with flair.

Indeed, it was one of those rare occasions when exhilarated audience members sat spellbound listening to an extraordinary performance — of a level rarely heard at a concert by a community orchestra. In the end, concertgoers awarded Pitcairn with a standing ovation.

Sunday's concert featured all Brahms music, and to open the program Berkson selected the composer's mysterious Tragic Overture in D minor, composed in 1880. The oboe and horns were memorable, and the orchestra gave the overture a robust sound, somber at times, but not especially tragic.

Serenade No. 2 in A major, completed in 1859, followed. It's a curious work composed for a small ensemble without violins, so all but a couple of the most seasoned violinists walked off the stage to make room for the woodwinds and a smattering of brass, who took their seats.

The Serenade has five movements, and here there were problems. Some players failed to stay in tune, although flutists Beth Pflueger and Cathy Wong and oboist Linda Muggeridge were able to somewhat carry the day. In the final menuetto and rondo movements,

Berkson had better luck coaxing a beautiful tone from most of the players, and Maria Ramey's piccolo at the end delighted the audience.

The piece has many difficult passages, but they're not beyond this orchestra, and to his credit Berkson likes to challenge his players and encourage them to grow.

Peninsula Symphony's next concert, "Russian Roulette," is scheduled for Feb. 17 at the same venue and will feature violinist Mimi Jung, co-winner of the 2011 Edith Knox Competition, in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto.

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