

Gypsy Spirit

Elizabeth Pitcairn plays the Mendelssohn Strad, the fiddle that has inspired the hit Hollywood film 'The Red Violin' and continues to inspire its owner.

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By David Templeton

Serched in murmuring rows on the antiquated wooden pews of St. John's Episcopal Church in the upscale enclave of Ross, California, the sold-out audience is more than routinely focused this afternoon. As violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn, 33, tall and striking in a salmon-colored backless gown, glides purposefully into view and up onto the stage, every eye is trained in her direction. Unlike at most classical concerts, however, very few members of this audience are actually looking at *her*. What everyone is staring at, as the Los Angeles-based violinist takes her position alongside New York pianist John Novacek, is the weathered violin cradled lightly under her arm. What Pitcairn carries is not just a world-class violin; it is a sanctified cinematic and musical icon, a certified symbol of love, beauty, and freedom, one that is adored and idolized by millions of people across the planet. What we are looking at is the Mendelssohn Stradivari—otherwise known as the Red Violin.

"It's a little like coming face-to-face with the Maltese Falcon," someone whispers. And this moment is a bit like that, like rounding a corner in a friend's house and suddenly spying Han Solo frozen in carbonite and hanging on a bedroom wall.

But carbonite slabs and Maltese falcons are the stuff of fiction.

The Red Violin, on which Pitcairn is about to play Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 7 and Ferdinand Ries' *Perpetuum Mobile*, is the real deal, the genuine article, the very same mysterious 1720 Stradivari that vanished from sight shortly after its creation, inspiring scores of storytellers to imagine what musical adventures might have befallen it.

Elizabeth Pitcairn

Lost for over 21 decades, the violin with the astonishingly sweet sound and the mysterious history was the inspiration for François Girard's Oscar-winning 1998 film *The Red Violin* (which Joshua Bell recorded), about a cursed violin that traverses the globe, passing from doomed owner to doomed owner until, scratched and scarred and all but forgotten, it is finally spotted at auction and sold for a king's ransom. At the end of the film, the violin disappears again from public view, quickly ending up in the hands of a little girl, a promising young violinist too young to recognize the true nature of the treasure she holds.

In the real-life version of the story, that "little girl" is Pitcairn, though she was actually 16 when the Strad was presented to her as a gift from her grandfather. All that is known about the violin was that it vanished from sight soon after it was built and documented. Centuries later, in 1945, it quietly came into the possession of a wealthy businessman, who purchased it in Berlin from the descendants of Felix Mendelssohn. While no proof exists that the great composer ever touched the instrument, photos exist of the instrument being played often by members of the Mendelssohn family quartet, who apparently only included the violin in informal parlor performances.

"In a lot of ways, the violin makes me a better violinist, mainly just by my trying to live up to its potential."

After 45 years of private use, the businessman put the violin up for auction and suddenly, as if springing from the mists of time, the "Mendelssohn Strad"—as it became known—was back in public view, sparking massive international interest and fierce competition from players and collectors.

In 1990, it was sold for \$1.6 million and immediately disappeared again amid rumors it had been purchased by someone from Iran. The truth would not be announced for more than a decade, coming to light more or less simultaneously with Pitcairn's stunning professional debut as a soloist, performing with the New York String Orchestra at Lincoln Center.

Since that first concert, the tale of the Mendelssohn Strad—already lifted to legendary status by Girard's film and the gorgeous Oscar-winning score by composer John Corigliano—has become synonymous with the fast-rising career of Elizabeth Pitcairn. Corigliano's *Red Violin Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra* is now a fairly regular part of her repertoire, though she is confident enough in her playing—backed up by glowing reviews whenever she performs—to feel she is neither in competition with nor unduly dependent upon her famous violin.

Every eye may be on the Strad when she takes the stage, but if the Ross concert is any measure, it doesn't take long for the audience to shift its focus entirely (or almost entirely) to Pitcairn.

This season includes performances with the Fort Collins Symphony in Colorado, New Jersey's Ridgewood Symphony, the Bourgas Symphony in Bulgaria, the Marin Symphony in California, and Orchestra 2001 in Philadelphia, to name a few. She is renowned for the dedication and effort she puts into her performances—which she keeps light with bits of well-timed banter and introductions peppered with engagingly casual silliness. "Next I will perform a tango," she says at one point in the concert, beaming as she adds, "Think of it as the Last Tango in Ross!"

Pitcairn, on and off stage, is both practical and humble where the Red Violin is concerned.

In my life, the one and only thing that has been handed to me on a silver platter is this violin," she says, making a pot of tea at a friend's house the day before the Ross concert. "Everything else that I've achieved, I've worked for. I was handed a tool to make my life with, and I've used that tool to build a career."

That said, she admits to feeling a deep sense of responsibility.

"Imagine being 16 years old and you've just been given this coveted violin, an instrument that violinists around the world would *die* for—and you're the one who has it," she says. "I remember, the first time I played it in my living room, I thought, 'How am I going to live up to all of that?' I just felt this *tremendous* sense of responsibility. I knew that I couldn't squander that incredible opportunity I'd been given. In a lot of ways, the violin makes me a better violinist, mainly just by my trying to live up to its potential."

Pitcairn has become expert in giving a short two-minute summation of the story of the Red Violin and how it came to be hers. This afternoon, as she sips her tea outside with the song of garden birds underscoring her talk, she clearly relishes the opportunity to tell the tale at a more languid pace.

"My first full-sized violin, when I was about ten, was a very inexpensive German instrument," Pitcairn says. "My mother—who's a Juilliard-trained cellist—wanted me to start training on the cello, but I picked the violin, and all of my lessons and training and all of that were geared toward producing a soloist-caliber violinist. From day one, that's what I've trained for. After the German violin, I graduated to a sort of Italian instrument, a Panormo that my mother had rescued in pieces and had restored."

That was when Pitcairn was 12. When she was 14, she was given another violin, a Guadagnini, which was expected to become her career instrument. "It was a pretty fantastic violin," Pitcairn says, "so there was no real thought after that of my getting anything better—but when I was 16, that all sort of changed."

A phone call came telling her about a Stradivari—not the Mendelssohn Strad—that had just come onto the market. "I said, 'How much is it,' and they said, '\$1.4 million,'" Pitcairn recalls. "So I said, 'Hold on a second ... Mom!'

"I expected her to reprimand me, but instead she had them come out [to where we lived] and we took a look at the violin. It wasn't the one we wanted, but it kind of sparked this search for the perfect violin."

Eventually, Pitcairn's mother heard that the Mendelssohn Strad would be coming up for auction. After a great deal of research, one 24-hour trip to London—where Pitcairn played the instrument and fell hopelessly in love with it—and one call to the aforementioned wealthy grandfather, a strategic action-at-the-auction plan was concocted. Bob James, a bow maker and family friend, was designated as the bidder.

The auction took place on Thanksgiving Day. Pitcairn was not present—"My stomach was in knots all day, waiting to hear what was happening"—though she received occasional reports as the day proceeded.

"Bob sat in the very back," she says, "and got into the bidding very late, demoralizing the competition. It came down to the very last bid he could make, they said 'Sold!' and Bob went running down the long curving staircase out of Christies, chased by a hoard of reporters, all yelling, 'What country are you from?' We were trying to keep the whole thing a secret, so he just yelled out, 'Iran,' and kept running.

"So all of the headlines in the papers came out saying [erroneously] that the violin had been sold to Iran."

At the time, the teenage Pitcairn was eager to publicize the acquisition. "I remember thinking, 'Gee, I'll be famous overnight!'" she says. But her parents, for issues of security, nixed that idea. With music experts and historians believing the Mendelssohn Strad was in a vault somewhere in Tehran, the true location of the violin—rural Pennsylvania—remained a secret for the next 13 years, during which Pitcairn attended the University of Southern California. "I wasn't allowed to bring the Stradivari to the freshman dorm," she says.

Meanwhile, she trained with renowned violin instructor Robert Lipsett at the USC Thornton School of Music, while regularly competing around the country and working as an instructor at the Colburn School in Los Angeles. She also served for seven years as concertmaster of the New West Symphony, becoming the first female concertmaster in that organization's history.

By the time she was ready to launch her solo career, Pitcairn was ready to reveal the identity of the violin that had been her secret companion since her teens.

Now she's grateful that her parents forbade her from revealing the truth, as the violin might have eclipsed her own rise to her status as a certified violin virtuoso. "The interesting thing is," she says, "that during those years, the violin and I grew together, we evolved together. I really do think of it as my partner. As my career evolved, and people started to hear about the violin, it totally wasn't out of balance, the 'buzz' was never just about the violin. It was about 'the *girl* and the violin.'

"I had to make it on my own as a violinist, but the violin has always been my partner as I've done that."

So ... want to see it?" Pitcairn bounces up from the outside patio table, where we've been sitting, and leads the way into the living room, where the violin is laying on a coffee table, more like a knick-knack than a priceless historical artifact. She picks it up, turns it over, and steps near the window, into a stream of afternoon light that softly illuminates its nicks and scars, which suggest a fairly rough life for the Red Violin.

"Sometimes," Pitcairn says, "when I play it, I think about all of the other people who might have played it and the places it might have gone. I look at the markings and the scars on it, the places where it was obviously repaired after being seriously damaged, and I think, 'What happened to you?' This violin was missing for 210 years. How many people saw it, touched it, and played it during that time?"

Asked if she would be a different violinist if she had grown up with a different violin, Pitcairn can't quite answer. "Well, you can't really separate me from that violin," she says, "because my concept of sound comes from that violin. Having said that, I have to add that that was always my concept of sound, and that's part of why I chose that violin. We were put together because my idea of a gorgeous sound was the sound of this violin."

In the movie, the Red Violin is cursed, haunted by the spirit of the violin maker's late wife, after the lamenting luthier mixes her blood into the instrument's varnish. While there's no sign of the Mendelssohn Strad bringing a curse into Pitcairn's life—quite the opposite—she does admit to picking up a certain "haunted" vibe, poetically speaking, from time to time.

"I definitely get a haunted feeling whenever I play the Red Violin Chaconne," she laughs. "It's kind of spooky. I get chills onstage when I'm playing it. That piece of music is kind of this violin's voice. When I'm playing that chaconne, that's when the violin can tell its own story, that's when it can actually speak."

Pitcairn has been playing the Chaconne since 2000, with Corigliano's blessing. She was just the third musician to play it after Bell and Brian Lewis. "I play it a lot," Pitcairn says. "I'm playing it four times this season. I get a lot of mileage out of that piece."

While the bulk of the violin's history will probably remain undiscovered, Pitcairn believes that what matter's most is the present—and the future.

"Francois Gerard [co-writer and director of the film] told me that what I'm doing with it now is the continuation of the journey," Pitcairn says. "In the movie, the Red Violin is cursed because the maker put all of his grief and anger into the making of the violin. If I wanted to be morbid, I suppose I could say that my own life is cursed, that I'm cursed with this passion, cursed with this love of what I do."

She laughs at her own words.

"I know what that sounds like, but really, being a concert violinist is a terrible price to pay in life, in a way. The average person cannot conceive of what it takes, the constant training from the age of three, this pressure that is always with you, pressure that is off the charts every second, and then the high-wire act you perform, without a net, every time you walk out there on stage. You can't ever stop. You play when you're sick, when you're injured, when you're sad, when you're scared, when you're exhausted, when you're happy—but every so often the heavens conspire and you have a performance that you will be happy with and remember for the rest of your life.

"So, does all of that count as a curse?" she asks. "If so, then I'm cursed, but I'm also blessed, because I love every minute of it! Everything I just mentioned—I love it all. I've accepted all of it as part of my life, and I wouldn't trade it for a normal life. This violin has taken me around the world, and it will continue to take me around the world.

"I'm a natural born gypsy," she smiles. "I'm a born world traveler—just like the Red Violin!"

How Elizabeth Pitcairn Plays

TO MAXIMIZE THE POWER and purity of her famous instrument's sound, Elizabeth Pitcairn emulates the great concert artists who elect to play very close to the bridge. according to pitcairn, that is a much easier goal to aim for than it is to accomplish.

"To play close to the bridge is difficult," she says. "It's very difficult to control the sound, and you have to have a tremendous bow arm to have any control. I've been working on my bow arm for years and years. It's scary to play there, but that's what you need to do to produce a sound that carries and gets into the core of your instrument, into the inner depths of the violin."

Pitcairn uses either a Nicolas Maire, a Francois Tourte, or a Dominique peccatte bow depending on the piece she's playing. She believes that with an instrument as steeped in mystery as the Red Violin, there are always new musical secrets to discover: her bowing technique is the best method by which those secrets will be uncovered.

"The better I get with my bow arm," she says, "the more amazing the instrument becomes, these sounds come out of the violin that I never was able to get to before.

"Every time I play, I'm at least a little bit amazed."

-D.T.
