

After Adversity, a Passion Unchecked

Years After a Calamity, Rachel Barton Pine Prospers

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

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Asked by a student about her musical inspirations after a recent Baroque master class at Juilliard, the violinist [Rachel Barton Pine](#) gestured toward the stickers of heavy metal bands plastered on her violin case. “When they’re onstage, they’re getting everyone headbanging,” she said. “Within classical music my goal is to do the same thing, to give 150 percent and get everyone caught up in the emotions.”

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Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

Tenacity and a bravura technique: the violinist Rachel Barton Pine at a recent master class at the Juilliard School in Manhattan.

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[Heavy metal](#) and early music are among the many interests of Ms. Pine, an energetic Chicagoan who plays Baroque violin and viola d’amore with [Trio Settecento](#), her period-instrument ensemble. She also focuses on early 20th-century and [Romantic violin concertos](#). She recently recorded the [Glazunov Violin Concerto](#) with the Russian National Orchestra, with José Serebrier, a frequent collaborator, as conductor; other projects include a recording of 18th- and 19th-century black composers and a [book of original cadenzas and arrangements](#).

Striking and charismatic with waves of Pre-Raphaelite auburn hair, Ms. Pine often speaks to the audience during concerts. She offered anecdotes about Paganini’s 24 Caprices [during a performance](#) last year at Rockefeller University in which she demonstrated a bravura technique and soulful musicianship. (She will also perform the Caprices on Aug. 17 and 18 at the Ravinia festival in Highland Park, Ill.)

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In contrast to the [pyrotechnics](#) of the Paganini, her most recent release, “Violin Lullabies” ([Cedille](#)), features work by an eclectic range of well-known and obscure composers.

Inspired by the birth of her daughter, Sylvia, in September 2011, Ms. Pine unearthed the lullabies in libraries around the world and on the Internet.

“Sometimes I would hear someone else’s performance of these pieces, and they were interpreting it like a passionate piece of music, like I would if I didn’t know it was a

lullaby,” Ms. Pine, 38, said in an interview in Manhattan. “But once you know it’s a lullaby it takes you to a different place. You have to be calm and delicate.”

Ms. Pine, whose comments about classical music were threaded with anecdotes about the rock guitarist Eddie Van Halen and Dave Lombardo, a former drummer with the thrash metal band Slayer, doesn’t plan to perform all of the lullabies live, “unless I’m playing for a meeting of Insomniacs Anonymous,” she said jokingly. “It’s funny, because I have been advocating to fellow rock fans that classical music can be just as exciting as any other music out there, and it’s not just pretty stuff that puts you to sleep. And now I’ve made an entire album of just that!”

Ms. Pine’s range of achievement is all the more impressive given her setbacks. In 1995, when she was 20, the doors of a Chicago commuter train closed on the straps of her violin case as she tried to get off. She was dragged about 200 feet; half of her left leg was severed and her right foot was mangled. Her upper body was unscathed. She had to use a wheelchair at first, but after many operations and a long recuperation she learned to walk with a prosthetic leg. (Four years later she would be awarded \$29.6 million in a lawsuit against the commuter line and a railroad company.)

Ms. Pine, then on the brink of a major career, said she saw the accident as just another challenge after a difficult childhood. Her parents, now divorced, encouraged her musical aspirations.

“I nagged for a violin when I was 3, and by age 5 I self-identified as a violinist and was signing my kindergarten papers ‘Rachel, violinist,’” she said. “That was the core of my being.”

Yet because her father, Terry Barton, was unemployed throughout her youth, Ms. Pine became the family breadwinner, playing weddings and orchestra gigs. Any prize money from music competitions that she entered covered groceries and rent rather than lessons or sheet music. Her mother, Amy Barton, home-schooled her and her two younger sisters to accommodate Ms. Pine’s hectic musical schedule. She practiced up to eight hours a day and performed at 10 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; at 17, she won the 1992 Bach International Competition in Leipzig, Germany.

International Competition in Leipzig, Germany.

“I feel like my childhood formed my character,” she said, describing “seemingly hopeless situations” in which the family could not pay for the gasoline that would be needed to drive to lessons or she did not know whether scholarship money would come through.

“And yet I think that God meant for me to be a violinist. That’s the sort of illogical aspect of faith.” (Ms. Pine is a member of the United Church of Christ.)

“I would just have to hold onto hope and keep practicing and doing my best and believe that everything would work out even if I couldn’t possibly see how it could,” she said. “I spent the precarious years of my childhood living like that, so when I was injured, it wasn’t, as many people think, a defining or life-changing moment. It was more like, ‘Oh, one more challenge, one more bump in the road.’”

“I have a problem with the theology that bad things happen on purpose to teach you,” she added. “People would say to me, ‘One day you’ll understand why God did this to you.’ I was like, ‘Not my God.’”

As far as the damage to her career from the accident, “it would have been unnatural to not have felt some angst about being on a certain trajectory and having the pause button pushed and not being able to pick up exactly where I left off,” she said. “But I simply try not to think about it.

“It’s like Aslan says in one of the Narnia books. We are not ever given to know what might have been. I could sit down and theorize what my life would be like if this hadn’t happened, but that would be as pointless as wondering what my life would have been like if my father had had a job.”

Accompanied by her mother, she began touring again two years after the accident. Ms. Pine now travels with her husband, Greg Pine, a former minor league pitcher whom she met at church. He manages his computer business when they are on the road. The couple have a home in downtown Chicago.

In a phone interview, Mr. Serebrier, the conductor, said that while Ms. Pine has not performed recently with the top-tier orchestras, she “has all the elements: talent, charisma, dedication and passion. There is no reason she shouldn’t be playing with all the major orchestras in the world.”

“Her versatility is beyond belief,” he added. “Whether it’s modern or Romantic, she gets the right style. And she’s very humble. If I make suggestions, she takes them very seriously.”

Ms. Pine said she was often asked during master classes about how to manage stage fright. As a child, she explains, she would set stuffed animals on the couch; step atop the

coffee table, pretending that it was a stage; and perform and bow. This prepared her for real performances, she said, and she never suffered from nerves.

When giving speeches, though, she has experienced stage fright. She decided to put her anxiety to use, realizing that by facing the issue she could help her nervous violin students. Among other steps, she practiced in front of her husband and eventually improved. “Now I can give a speech and survive,” she said.

A lot in life is “dumb luck,” she said. “I try to always think about the positive — and ignore the rest.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 27, 2013

An earlier version of this article omitted one of the dates on which Rachel Barton Pine will perform Paganini’s Caprices at the Ravinia festival in Highland Park, Ill. She will play them on Aug. 18, in addition to Aug. 17. The article was also imprecise about Ms. Pine’s appearances with top-tier orchestras. She has performed with top orchestras, like the Chicago Symphony in 2009, but not recently.