

## American violinist Rachel Barton Pine: 'Relaxing music makes me tense'



Virtuoso violinist Rachel Barton Pine is known for her interpretations of music by composers such as Bach and Paganini, and used to play in the thrash/doom heavy metal band Earthen Grave. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SINGAPORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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Toh Wen Li (mailto:tohwenli@sph.com.sg)

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SINGAPORE - What do heavy metal and classical music have in common? A lot more than you think, suggests virtuoso violinist Rachel Barton Pine, who has had a lifelong passion for both.

The 45-year-old Chicago native is known for her interpretations of music by composers such as Bach and Paganini, and used to play in the thrash/doom heavy metal band Earthen Grave.

Speaking to The Straits Times over the phone last week from a hotel room in Salt Lake City, where she was due to perform, Pine rattles off a list of rock and heavy metal artists - from Scorpions' former lead guitarist Uli Jon Roth, to Marty Friedman of heavy metal band Megadeth - who were inspired by classical music, drawn to the emotional intensity and bombast of Romantic-era works.

Paganini's Caprices "set the standard for all the fancy notes you can do on the instrument", she adds, referring to the Italian virtuoso's fiendishly difficult solos for the violin.

Pine who started playing the violin at the age of three and listening to hard rock and heavy metal when she was 10 years old, says: "After practising violin all day, I couldn't really relax by listening to classical music, because I would still be analysing it too much. I needed something where I could just turn off my brain."

Pine will soon begin a two-week music residency at the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Her concert at the Victoria Concert Hall on Oct 27 will combine her twin passions - featuring her string quartet arrangements of songs by bands such as Metallica and Van Halen, interspersed with pieces by Shostakovich, Paganini and others. She will also perform at the Esplanade on Oct 26 and Nov 1, presenting programmes showcasing Scottish fiddling techniques and the music of English composer Elgar.

ADVERTISING



Playing with major orchestras around the world might seem like a glamorous profession, but Pine's life hasn't been a bed of roses.

She describes her early life as a "tenuous existence". Her father, who eventually left her and her two younger sisters to be raised by their mother, was unemployed for most of her childhood. Their phone and electricity would often be turned off, and all her concert clothes came from the thrift store.

Music was a silver lining. Pine, who was home-schooled by her mother to accommodate her busy schedule, played with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the age of 10. By her teens, she was the family's main breadwinner, and was taking on orchestra gigs. At 17, she became the youngest person - and first American - to win the International Johann Sebastian Bach Competition in Leipzig, before going on to release her first album in 1994.

But in 1995, at the age of 20, calamity struck. When she was getting off a train in Chicago, the doors closed on the straps of her violin case, causing her to be dragged along for about 100m, severing one leg and injuring the other. After numerous surgeries and physical therapy, she learnt to walk with a prosthetic leg.

The incident, which left her unable to travel for two years, is not something she wants to dwell on. "It wasn't as life-changing as it might have been," says the musician, who says she saw it as another roadblock in life she could work to overcome.

"I made my first album before I was injured, but I made 38 more after," adds Pine, who has recorded Elgar & Bruch Violin Concertos with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and Mozart: Complete Violin Concertos with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields.

In 2001, she started the Rachel Barton Pine Foundation, which supports young artists with an instrument loan programme, grants for concert attire, transportation to auditions, and more. The foundation is also known for its Music by Black Composers initiative, which has collected over 900 works by more than 350 black composers from the 18th to 21st centuries from multiple continents. Last year (2018), it published a violin volume, the first in a series of pedagogical books of sheet music by Black classical composers.

"Because there was such a long-standing exclusion and discrimination in America," Pine says, "a lot of African American families think that classical music is someone else's music. They don't know their own history."

Pine is married to Greg Pine, a former minor league baseball pitcher who is the chief executive of a healthcare consulting firm. Her husband and their eight-year-old daughter Sylvia travel with her almost all the time. Sylvia, too, is home-schooled, and enjoys writing her own melodies and improvising on the violin.

Pine may be extraordinarily gifted, but hard work has also played a role in her success.

"From the age of three, when I started lessons, I never missed a single day of practice. Even if it was my birthday, holiday or I had the flu. That's what's important. Not to practice very hard, then skip a day," says Pine, a self-driven child who practised eight hours a day between the ages of 11 and 17, and begged her parents for lessons when she was a little girl.

"Every moment you are practising, you need to be able to listen to yourself. You can easily make bad habits worse by practising sloppily for hours and hours."

Pine has hypersensitive perfect pitch, which she says can be a handicap sometimes.

"If I have been practising at A=440 Hz, and I go to an orchestra and they are tuned to A=442 Hz, I am going to be exactly two hertz flat on every single note," says Pine, on her sensitivity to frequency. "I have to ask every orchestra ahead of time, 'What A do you use?'".

Other pet peeves include out-of-tune elevator dings - when the notes clash to form something "like a sharp minor second" - as well as the "soothing", pseudo-Asian music in doctors' waiting rooms, which she finds "over-simplistic and repetitive".

She adds: "It's maddening. 'Relaxing' music makes me tense."

Pine would like to see more chamber music concerts performed in smaller, more intimate settings, and more classical music concerts with opening acts.

"Wouldn't that be brilliant, if I gave a 90min recital and 30min before I went on stage, a young artist had the opportunity to be showcased to all the people who bought the tickets to hear me, but are now hearing a protege I am endorsing?"

Pine says she has never felt nervous during a performance.

"I grew up playing in my church, and I had this real sense of there not being a separation between performer and audience. We were all experiencing the music together, and I just happened to be the one playing it, I was just channeling the music.

"Nervousness is the threat to the self. If it's not about you, then there is no nervousness."

### **BOOK IT/SCOTTISH FANTASY: RACHEL BARTON PINE**

WHERE: Esplanade Concert Hall, 1 Esplanade Drive

WHEN: Oct 26, 7.30pm. There will be a pre-concert talk in library@esplanade at 6.30pm

ADMISSION: From \$15 at <http://ticketing.sso.org.sg/sso/booking/csub1910261930>

INFO: [www.sso.org.sg/orchestra-season/scottish-fantasy-o-rachel-barton-pine](http://www.sso.org.sg/orchestra-season/scottish-fantasy-o-rachel-barton-pine)

### **BOOK IT/VCHPRESENTS EXCITE!: SHREDDING WITH RACHEL BARTON PINE**

WHERE: Victoria Concert Hall, 9 Empress Place

WHEN: Oct 27, 4pm

ADMISSION: From \$20 at <https://ticketing.sso.org.sg/sso/booking/cssov1910271600>

INFO: [www.sso.org.sg/vchpresents/shredding-with-rachel-barton-pine](http://www.sso.org.sg/vchpresents/shredding-with-rachel-barton-pine)

### **BOOK IT/ELGAR VIOLIN CONCERTO & ENIGMA VARIATIONS**

WHERE: Esplanade Concert Hall, 1 Esplanade Drive

WHEN: Nov 1, 7.30pm

ADMISSION: From \$15 at <http://ticketing.sso.org.sg/sso/booking/csub1911011930>

INFO: [www.sso.org.sg/orchestra-season/elgar-violin-concerto-enigma-variations](http://www.sso.org.sg/orchestra-season/elgar-violin-concerto-enigma-variations)

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