

The Lipinski Affair

Written by Mark Shaffer

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World-renowned violinist Frank Almond brings his



famous centuries old Stradivarius to Beaufort to benefit the Boys and Girls Clubs.

Interview by Mark Shaffer

Frank Almond talks about the 300-year-old violin he plays as if it were a person. Although he considers the rare and valuable Lipinski Stradivarius to be a “super high-end tool” it is also the most intimate of partners, one who pushes his skill far beyond the limits of lesser instruments. So, when a stranger tasered him and took it in a Milwaukee parking lot on a subzero winter’s night in 2014 it felt more like a kidnapping than an armed robbery.

What followed over the course of nine days made international headlines, spawned a lengthy piece in *Vanity Fair* as well as a BBC documentary and shook the world of classical

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music. “It was unprecedented,” says Almond. This had simply never happened before. The Lipinski, valued at around \$6 million, was recovered thanks largely to two things: 1) a police chief who made it priority number one for the Milwaukee P.D., and 2) a small time crook with delusions of grandeur and half of a plan. And it wasn’t even a very good half at that.

Mr. Almond brings the Lipinski and the tale of The Stradivarius Affair to Beaufort on January 9th for a benefit to raise funds for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Northern Beaufort County (see following article for details). The newly restored Tabby Place on Port Republic Street in historic downtown Beaufort is the setting for

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And according to Almond, concertmaster for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, he and pianist Michael Braz won’t be serving up anything stuffy.

“Well, hopefully it will have much more of a party atmosphere than most classical concerts
a



lot of people experience,” Almond says with a laugh. “I’m not one for the traditional stuffy classical event, although that is a tradition that endures. This is a fundraiser for the Boys and Girls Club – that’s the focus – at the same time [pianist] Mike Braz and I thought this would be a great way to play some terrific music and tell a good story at the same time. It should be pretty lively.”

Mark Shaffer: Most people don’t associate ‘lively’ with classical music. Are you constantly battling that expectation of stuffy and boring?

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Frank Almond: Yes, I am. But one of the big problems is that classical music *is* sometimes stuffy and boring. (Both laugh)

And that's something that's stuck with it for a variety of reasons. Some of the formats are antiquated and full of tradition and there are a lot of people who feel strongly that those traditions should be upheld. The fact is that most people, in this country especially, don't know a whole lot about classical music. It's not part of their daily lives. One of my main objectives, both with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and my chamber music series, is to have an atmosphere and a format – an experience – that people can relate to on a number of different levels. It's not phony. It's not designed to trick them into the concert hall. It's designed to bring people in to listen to some music that might change the way they think. And ultimately that's what happens with a lot of people.

MS: Of course another attraction for this event is the instrument you'll be playing –



the Lipinski Stradivarius. I've just re-read Buzz Bissinger's piece on the heist in *Vanity Fair* (The Stradivarius Affair, November, 2014).

FA: He did a great job with it.

MS: It's crazy and we'll get to that in a moment. But I'm guessing most of the people

who attend this event have never been in a room with something like this.

FA: It's rare because there are only four or five hundred instruments like this that were made in the Stradivari workshop that are still around and largely intact. That makes the Lipinski pretty rare indeed, but the larger point – and this comes up a lot when you talk about monetary evaluations and things like that – is why these things are so expensive. Who would pay that amount of money for a violin? There are a couple of reasons. First, Stradivari was indisputably the greatest musical instrument maker of all time. He achieved that by a number of different means. He was a brilliant craftsman, but more than that, he was an innovator.

He expanded on about a hundred years of knowledge before him and completely revolutionized the way people made these instruments. Essentially, he was an incredible engineer. And on top of that he was an amazing businessman. (Both laugh)

He had what amounted to a very small, very elite assembly line. He probably had two or three people working for him most of the time. And his instruments were highly coveted during his lifetime. He became incredibly famous and incredibly wealthy and he put a lot of violinmakers out of business.

MS: He was the William Shakespeare of violinmakers.

FA: Totally. But everyone knew who he was (laughs). His instruments were highly valued and coveted the moment they left the shop. And not only that, they were the best of the best for musicians. So you take all that and roll it together with these incredible pedigrees and histories of the people who owned them and the stories about them, plus they're functional antiquities that are totally unique.

That's something that a lot of people don't understand. You can buy a table at Ikea and you can buy a Biedermeier table and they essentially serve the same function: you can set stuff on them. (Both laugh)

But something on the level of a Stradivarius? Nobody's doing that now and that's kind of

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amazing when you think about the age in which we live. Ultimately [instruments like this] are super high-end tools that allow you to be creative in ways that you couldn't before.

MS: There's also the cache that goes along with the name Stradivarius.

FA: Right.

MS: A lot of people get it even if they have no practical knowledge of what the instrument's capable of. It sort of precedes itself.

FA: Yeah, it's kind of like saying "Tesla" these days. (Both laugh)

MS: Bottom line, it's simply unlike any other instrument.

FA: It probably took a year or so for us to get used to each other. That's a very mysterious process, as well, because you don't really understand how to use it for quite a while. I use the analogy that it's like somebody giving you a Ferrari to drive. You can wreck it really easily. (Both laugh)

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