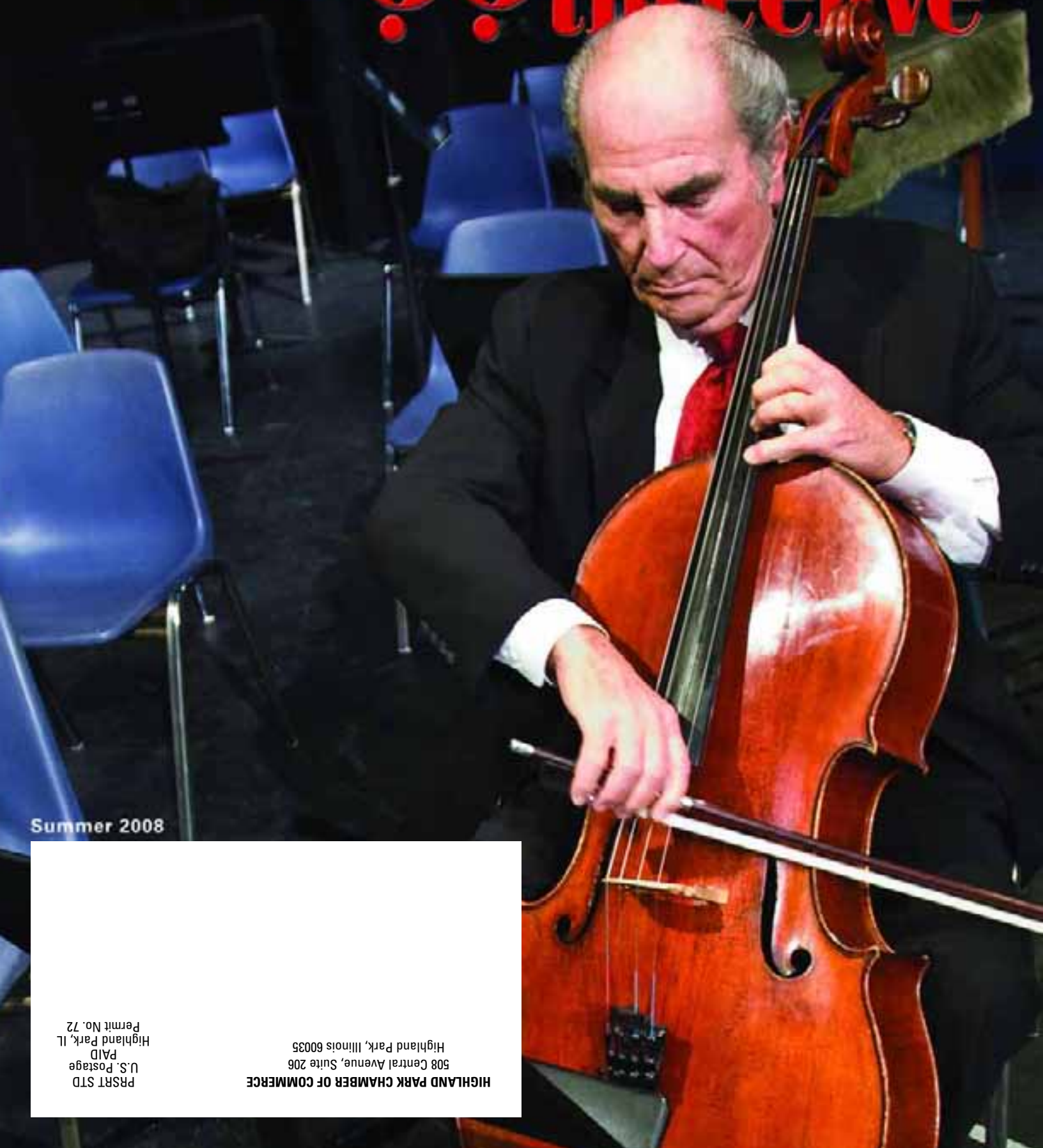


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# Larger Than Life

by Stephanie Glazer Ettelson

**“It’s all about the music,” says Larry Block. Actually, it’s also about a persona and about one man, Larry Block. He dreamed of a community model of cultural ingenuity coming into being and had the moxie to make it endure. That dream is the Highland Park Strings, turning 30 next year.**

Larger than life, Larry Block, Highland Park’s resident music man and philanthropist, has been entertaining North Shore residents for nearly 30 years. A world-class cellist himself, Larry is the founder of The Highland Park Strings, dubbed by the *Chicago Tribune* as “a little miracle in Highland Park.” For three decades, Larry and his HP Strings troupe have shared our town’s musical gem with the world and to international acclaim.

Larry’s passion for music and life is reflected in the bright red power tie he usually wears. Whether it’s welcoming the audience of loyal listeners or thanking the Park District for its base-line financial backing, Larry is exuberant and generous with anyone he meets. The Park District’s funding enables the Highland Park Strings to present concerts free of charge, a unique concept in community orchestra funding. Additional monies derive from an annual benefit concert sponsored by Y.E.A! Highland Park and, in great measure, the ongoing generosity of individual donors gently coaxed by Larry, most of whom are loyal patrons. These loyal patrons truly realize that these concerts are the best “buy” around.

Next year, The Highland Park Strings will celebrate a major milestone—its 30th anniversary! Comprised of 36 top-notch players—pros and amateurs, world-class soloists among them—the Strings performers are almost half from within our town’s borders; many are from the Chicago Symphony. While Larry is the principle reason that these musicians play with the HP Strings, the common thread is their love of performing great music with Larry and their peers and the immutable bond of extended family.

Larry juggles more hats than most mortals wear in a lifetime—as impresario, he engages the soloists; as personnel manager, he recruits and solves problems; as librarian, he acquires the music and copies it; as



director of development, he oversees an annual budget of about \$65,000 and eschews a board of directors. Simultaneously, he serves as program annotator, tour director (more about that later) and co-principal cellist.

That’s not quite all of it. If you happen to arrive about half an hour before the start of a Wednesday evening rehearsal, you will see Larry setting up chairs and stands, making coffee, passing out parts, greeting newcomers and even changing overhead light bulbs to bump up the wattage. Then he sits down at the first stand of the cello section to warm up and wrestle with difficult parts, often solos.

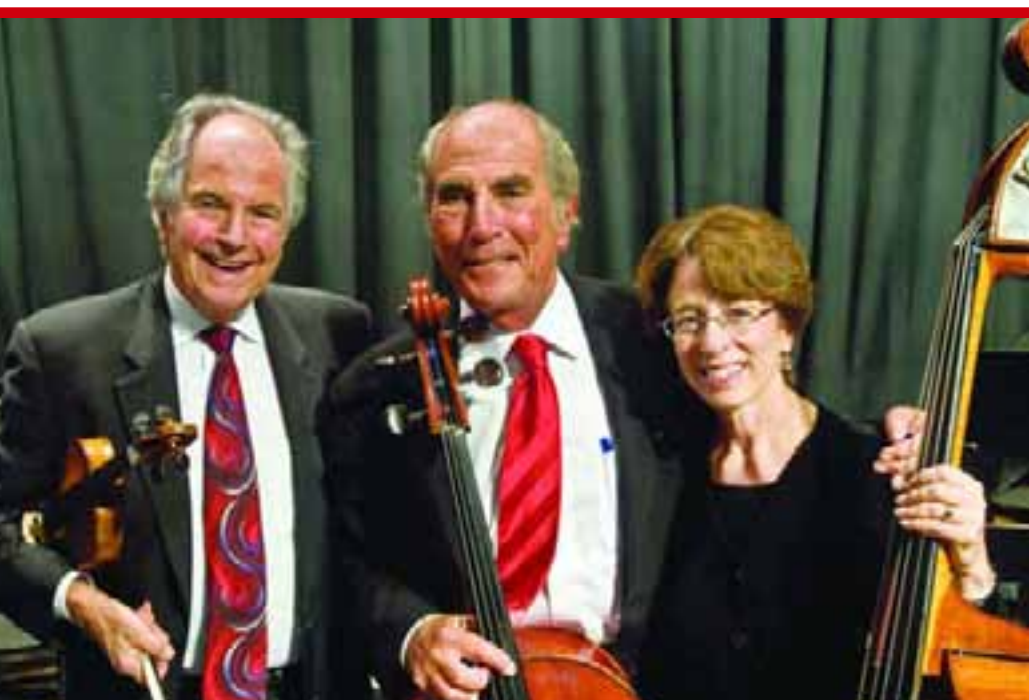
ALL PHOTOS: Michael Metzger Photographer

## The Genesis of the Highland Park Strings

The Strings were born as a lark of Larry’s. In 1979, he assembled a dozen string players, primarily accomplished amateurs, to read the rich string orchestra repertoire. Each player pitched in five dollars to hire as their coach the great Francis Akos (“Ak”), an experienced conductor and concertmaster.

Ak was then assistant concertmaster of the Chicago Symphony and had conducted and toured Europe with the Chicago Strings in the ’60s.

As it turned out, Ak was perfect for the post. The close collaboration of Larry, the founder, and Ak, the conductor, lasted until Ak’s retirement last May. He now serves as music director and conductor emeritus of the Highland Park Strings.



From the original ensemble: Hugh “Buddy” Block, Larry Block and Susan Silverstone.

“Attendance at those first gatherings was hit and miss,” says Larry. “It was apparent that we needed to perform in order to have a real group because playing concerts produces good rehearsals.”

Enter Sylvia Delman, long-time Highland Park resident, a Park District Commissioner and Larry’s childhood classmate, who was instrumental in arranging the premier performance of the Highland Park Strings at West Ridge School in December 1979. “We played Mozart’s masterpiece, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,” recalls Larry. “There were 14 players and 30 people in the audience, all family!”

Even now, three members remain from that original ensemble. Not surprisingly, these veterans are family: Larry himself, cellist and lawyer; his brother Hugh “Buddy” Block, violinist and life insurance agent; and their niece, Susan Silverstone, string bassist in the ensemble, who teaches piano and is orchestra director for Deerfield School District 109.

Francis Akos’ successor is principal conductor  Francesco Milioto, who wields the baton with youthful exuberance and a mission—to make this grass-roots ensemble surpass itself each performance.

Larry admits to few “frustrations,” but notable irritations are the eleventh-hour cancellations of soloists for the YEA! benefit three years in a row and the scramble to obtain stellar replacements. Those replacements included pianist and HP resident Jorge Federico Osario in 2003 (performing at Ravinia this July 27); Misha Dichter for our ailing Maestro in 2004 (25th Anniversary); and pianist Shai Wosner in 2005. “Other than that,” says Larry, “the rest of our 29 years have been a piece of cake!”

The only concert Larry himself ever missed was in 1994 due to a life-threatening illness. Recovering miraculously in time to play the December concert, Larry says, “That was my all-time personal high—being able to play the extensive continuo in Vivaldi’s ‘Four Seasons’ with Jennifer Koh as violin soloist. That night’s numerous standing, stomping ovations...that was one for the record books.”

## Taking the Strings International

The Strings’ international chapter began in summer, 1995. (Since when do community orchestras go on tour!) In conjunction with the Highland Park Sister Cities Foundation, Larry arranged for the Strings to play and eat its way through a week-long, three-city tour of the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, including Ferrara, where many Highland Parkers have their roots.

In December 1998, the Strings traveled to Israel, presenting concerts in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ranana and Jerusalem, where Larry also celebrated the 50th anniversary of his Bar Mitzvah. Two more tours followed in 2004 and 2006, this time to Highland Park Sister City, Puerto Vallarta.

“Our group high was performing in Puerto Vallarta on the boardwalk at Los Arcos surrounded literally by 2,000 adoring fans,” says Larry. Carol Wolfe, Sister Cities President who was a Highland Park “String Along” on both trips to Puerto Vallarta, put it another way: “To be in that audience and see the rapt faces of parents and children was to know they were touched and that we could not have given the people of Puerto Vallarta a better gift.”

*(continued on next page)*



*Principal conductor Francesco Milioto*

And over these many years, the Strings’ audience base has grown by leaps and bounds. At the free concerts today, audiences average 800-900 in the auditorium at either Highland Park High School or Elm Place Middle School. For the YEA! Highland Park benefit, audiences are close to the 450-seat capacity at Ravinia Festival’s Bennett-Gordon Hall.

As for a signature musical piece, “Eine Kleine Nachtmusik,” is as close as they have, confirmed by its performance atop a flatbed in the Fourth of July Parade to kick off its 25th anniversary celebration. Today, the HP Strings have an extensive repertoire of more than 300 pieces that span three centuries of music, including all the great masterpieces for string orchestra by Tchaikovsky, Dvorak, Elgar and Shostakovich. In addition, they play Bach’s six Brandenburg Concerti (performed several times in a complete cycle), the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart plus an astounding array of solo concerti for practically every orchestral instrument.

Audiences and players of the Strings have been treated to brilliant performances by members of the CSO, including principal players like clarinetist Larry Combs and oboist Alex Klein; Chicago’s own violinist Rachel Barton Pine; rising stars violinist Jennifer Koh and pianist Jonathan Biss (who can be heard at Ravinia Festival this summer performing with the CSO July 8); international piano celebrities Misha and Cipa Dichter and the preeminent cellist Janos Starker, who performs for each major anniversary.

## Lawyer, Impresario, Cellist


Considered one of the most prominent business attorneys in the United States, Larry, 74, was Chief Operating Partner and Chairman of the Management Committee at Schiff Hardin LLP. But, playing the cello and creating the Highland Park Strings are arguably Larry's defining achievements ("CELLO" is spelled out on the license plate of his shiny black Jaguar) and surely rank as his most notable accomplishments and community legacy.

Larry credits (blames?) his cello playing on Schubert. When Larry was six, he heard a recording of Heifetz, Rubinstein and Feurmann play the Schubert "B-Flat Trio." He asked his mother—not herself a musician, but the moving force in his family—how he could make music like that. She responded, "Well, your brother Buddy plays the violin and your sister Carol plays the piano, so if you study cello, we'll have a trio in the family."

Despite his early promise—principal cellist at Von Steuben High School in Chicago, playing solo at graduation and a winner in the Junior and Senior Divisions of the Society of American Musicians Competition—he sidestepped a potential professional calling because "my teacher Hans Hess urged me to go to law school—one of his many wise suggestions!" recalls Larry.

The rest is history. A Northwestern University graduate who became a CPA, Larry went on to law school where he was Editor-in-Chief of the Northwestern Law Review while playing with the Evanston Symphony, conducted by principal cellist of the CSO Frank Miller.

Over the years, Larry has played with the Skokie Valley Symphony and the Lake Forest Symphony, but chamber music remains a consuming passion. For over a decade, he performed with the Cantabile Trio, playing regular gigs at senior centers, nursing homes and retirement homes. The original members of the group were Strings colleagues: violinist Stephanie Meis, a music teacher at HP's Music Arts School, and principal violist Vincent Oddo, who passed away last year. Larry still plays trios but retired the group's name to commemorate the death of his dear friend, who also is remembered for his composition, "The Highland Park Rag."

Accompanying Larry on his illustrious journey, and perhaps his guiding light, is his wife of 50 years, Abby , a gifted fabric artist in her own right.


And in the spirit of socialization for audience, artists and players, Abby and Buddy's wife Arlene plan and host beautiful receptions following benefit concerts. Abby instigated the concept of providing goodies to munch on at rehearsal break times and ensuring lavish lunches backstage before concerts. Inspiration springs from many sources, indeed.



Abby and Larry Block

## Familiar Faces, Multi-Faceted Players


One of the regulars on the Highland Park Strings' programs is Elaine Skorodin Fohrman (Glencoe), a critically-acclaimed concert violinist since age 10, who has soloed with the Strings many times, still tours as recitalist and soloist with orchestras and is retired faculty from the Chicago Musical College and University of Wisconsin. Her résumé includes studies with the revered Jascha Heifetz. She also has taught a number of the Strings, myself included. Elaine now occupies the principal second violin chair in the Strings "for fun and because I am personal friends with so many of the players."

Other stalwarts in the small ensemble are mother and daughter, Marilyn Shonfeld (Glencoe) and Francine Shonfeld Sherman (Highland Park), Strings concertmaster and assistant concertmaster, respectively.  Marilyn says, "I devote all my free time to music," and has earned respect as one of the area's top professionals as soloist, chamber musician, orchestral player and teacher. On Yom Kippur she performs "Kol Nidre" at Am Shalom in Glencoe.



Standing, l. to r., Rachel Fisher and Jane Conway. Seated, l. to r., Marilyn Shonfeld and Francine Shonfeld Sherman

For both Marilyn and Fran, the highlight of their Strings collaboration was the three-generation performance of Vivaldi's *Concerto for Three Violins* with Fran's daughter Deborah, then a seventh-grader at Elm Place School (and now principal second violinist at University of Michigan.) Proud mom says, "Three children in Suzuki programs (Leora on cello and Paul on violin) meant countless hours in lessons, practicing, performing and, of course, driving." An award-winning violinist at Brandeis University, Fran is also a writer and editor who freelances for the Chicago Botanic Garden.

Many people will recognize violinist Jane Conway , Executive Director of the Highland Park Public Library. She attended Interlochen (the summer music training program in Michigan for young musicians worldwide). The experience inspired her to pursue a music degree, including a semester in Vienna, before taking a graduate degree in library science won out. With the Strings, she enjoys "the wonderful camaraderie with many talented musicians."



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Jerry Taxy, a pathologist at the University of Chicago, is a chamber music “switch hitter,” playing both violin and viola. He’s as home-grown as they come, an alum of West Ridge School, Edgewood and Red Oak Junior Highs and Highland Park High School. “Whatever portion of my life is involved with music, it’s not enough,” says Jerry. “I love the people in this orchestra.”

Violinist Greg Jacobson, another Highland Park native, welcomes “the opportunity to play with a group of serious musicians and travel only five minutes to rehearsal!” The CEO of a human capital solutions organization, Greg recently returned to this area. He reminded me that I had been his Suzuki teacher when he was in kindergarten at Braeside School!



*The HP Strings perform at Ravinia Festival’s Bennett-Gordon Hall*



*Greg Jacobson*

Lucy Coleman, a seasoned professional who plays throughout the area, is co-principal cellist and a member of the Strings since the first full season. “Everything we’ve done is memorable,” she says. “Too many fabulous soloists, a magical Italian tour, both Mexican tours.”

Stephanie Meis, another professional violinist, is a psychotherapist with an energy-healing practice in Highland Park; she also teaches violin and viola at the Music Arts School and is first violinist with the Pilgrim Chamber Players. She writes music and plays for Aitz Hayim Center for Jewish Living in Highland Park. Stephanie recalls moving here from Flossmoor. “The North Shore was the unknown. Joining the Strings made me feel that I belonged.”

Other Highland Parkers who add hometown flavor to the Strings are violist Girard Miller, a retired member and director of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, and violinist Ronna Warshauer, who has a music major background and whose sister, Jane Casper, has been chair of the Ravinia Women’s Board for the past three years.

Rachel Fisher defies stereotypes as a young Highland Park super mom of two who holds a B.S. and M.S. in material science and engineering from MIT, works as an engineer from home and finds time to freelance as a top-tier professional violinist. Her Strings contacts she says have opened the doors to playing impromptu chamber music with other orchestra members. Soon she also will be practicing with the upcoming musician in her family, Jacob, age 3, who has just begun lessons on the string bass!

The magnitude of Larry’s impact on the music world is reflected by his past and present participation in the American Cello Council, the Chicago Cello Society, Chamber Music America, the Arts and Business Council of Chicago and the Holland America Music Society, which sponsors string competitions. Currently, he sits on the boards of the Ravinia Festival, Highland Park’s Music Arts School (now a satellite of the Music Institute of Chicago) and the New Millennium Orchestra.

Other community commitments include the Highland Park Community Foundation (past chair), board of the Highland Park Sister Cities Foundation and president of the Rotary Club of Highland Park.

Always looking for an excuse to perform, Larry initiated a “Bonus Chamber Music Concert” for contributors who donate \$100 or more to the Strings’ annual benefit. The complementary program held in April at the Highland Park Community House is an occasion for “Larry and Friends” (Strings members and other local luminaries) to perform in various ensemble combinations. Truth be told, anyone who walks in the door is welcome.

Larry and Abby have lived in Highland Park for 41 years. They have two daughters and a son and have been blessed with seven grandchildren, ages 7-19, who call Larry “Papa.” Their home is the hub for family gatherings that often number 40. Speaking as a fellow Strings member and member of Larry’s “other family,” I speak for us all as I say, “We can’t imagine life without fiddlin’ around in our own backyard.”

“Sometimes dreams do come true,” says Larry. Stay tuned. Larry’s Master Plan for the five concerts of the 30th anniversary year is in the works—soon to be posted on [www.hpstrings.org](http://www.hpstrings.org). Some time late summer, a beautiful brochure will appear at your doorstep.

*(see next page for a note of musical interest)*

***Stephanie Ettelson is principal of Stephanie Ettelson Public Relations specializing in media relations, integrated marketing strategies, promotional writing and special projects for a wide range of clients, including small businesses, non-profits organizations, arts and entertainment, and the hospitality industry. 847-433-4535, [settelson@comcast.net](mailto:settelson@comcast.net).***

ALL PHOTOS: Michael Metzger Photographer

The **Highland Park Strings** sound comes from talented players, to be sure (see previous pages). But there are also instruments with impeccable pedigrees that date to the 17th century. Like famous paintings, violins, violas and cellos made by Stradivarius, Gagliano, Guarneri, Amati, Panormo, Techler and Cordanus are prized beyond price by their owners. Esteemed modern instruments also offer exceptional beauty and tone.

Larry Block performs on a rare 1846 cello made by English master William Ebbsworth Hill, which has as much sentimental value as sound value, because it was purchased from his "idol and mentor," Janos Starker.

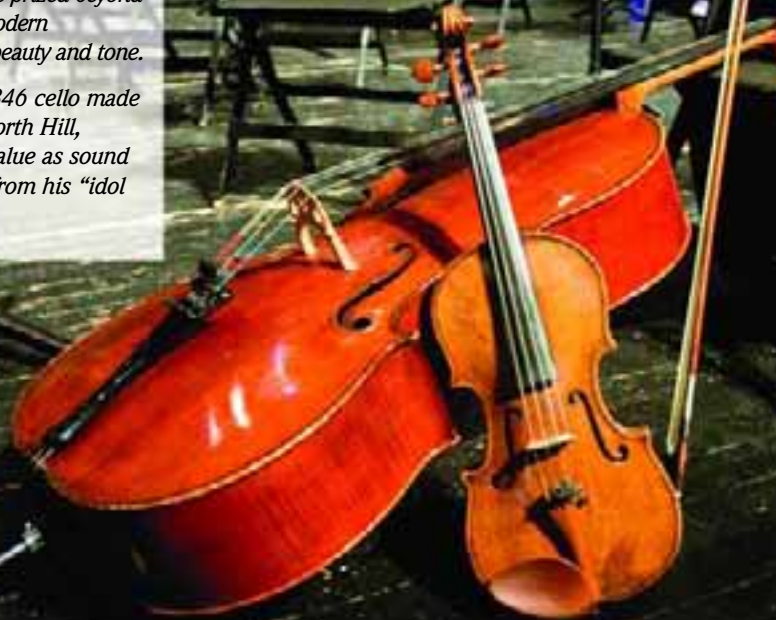


PHOTO: Michael Metzger Photographer

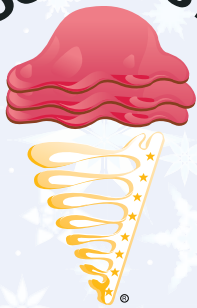
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