

Highland Park Strings

300 Years of Great Music

47TH SEASON

DR. ALLAN DENNIS, CONDUCTOR

FREE COMMUNITY CONCERTS | 2025-2026



300 Years of Great Music

OUR 47TH SEASON

FOUR COMMUNITY CONCERTS SUNDAYS AT 3:00 PM

As we begin our 47th season, we take pride in all that the Strings have accomplished. Over 450 unique works have been performed for over 100,000 persons. Under the direction of our leader, Dr. Allan Dennis, we will be revisiting many of these works this season, including Symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, beloved works of Bach, Concerti of Mozart, Brahms, Barber and the contemporary composer Stacy Garrop. We also welcome back some of our most notable soloists to join us in making this season special in every way. We are grateful for the support of the Highland Park Community Foundation, the Negaunee Foundation, the M.S. Bauer Foundation and the many individual contributors without whom we could not exist.

The opening concert on October 19 will feature in his 5th appearance with the Strings, **YANG LIU**. Yang is a dynamic and internationally acclaimed violinist, bringing his passion for music to audiences across North and South America. Asia and beyond. He performs as soloist with many of the world's leading orchestras and shares the stage with his wife the pianist Olivia as the beloved duo "Yang and Olivia". Over the course of his career Mr. Liu has performed in more than 40 countries. A prizewinner of the Twelfth International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, Mr. Liu is also the 2023 American Prize winner in String Performance. Performing on a 1741 Guarneri violin loaned by the Stradivari Society, he will play the Concerto by Samuel Barber and the Strings will add the Suite No 2 by Bach and Beethoven's sparkling Symphony No. 1.

For our "Holiday" concert on December 7, which will be devoted entirely to the music of Brahms, we are thrilled to welcome back violinist **ILYA KALER**. Described by Gramophone as a "magician, bewitching our ears", Mr. Kaler is the only violinist to win the Gold Medal at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, the Sibelius Competition in Helsinki, and the Paganini Competition in Genoa. One of the most sought after teachers in the world, Kaler currently serves as the violin professor of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Joining Mr. Kaler will be his cellist son **DANIEL**. A top prizewinner at the Medici International Music competition, Bach International Music Competition and Ravel Competition, among others, Daniel recently joined the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. The father and son will perform the great Double Concerto of Brahms and the Strings will play his beloved Symphony No. 1.

Our Gala Benefit Concert in the acoustically perfect Bennett Gordon Hall at Ravinia on February 1 brings back our dear friend and neighbor **SUSAN MERDINGER**, an internationally acclaimed Steinway Artist. She will be joined by pianist **STEVEN GREENE**, newly appointed Music Director and Organist at Highland Park Presbyterian Church. They first met at the Yale School of Music, where they were affectionately dubbed "the Dynamic Duo". Now celebrating their 40th anniversary as musical and life partners, the duo will perform the glorious Concerto for Two Pianos by Mozart. The Strings will add, in this all Mozart program, the Overture to the Marriage of Figaro and one of his last and greatest Symphonies, No. 40 in G minor.

The final concert on May 17 will feature the rising star, **CALLIA MURRAY**, a 16 year old violist from Vernon Hills. She currently studies with Jonathan Brown at the Colburn Music Academy in Los Angeles. She previously studied with **DESIREE RUHSTRAT** who graciously agreed to join Callia in this concert. On the Program is the Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 by Bach, the Concerto for Violin and Viola by Max Bruch and Krakatoa: Concerto for Viola by Stacy Garrop. The Strings conclude the season with the magnificent Serenade for Strings by Dvorak.



"Congratulations and thank you to Larry Block and the incredibly talented members of the Highland Park Strings! May they continue to provide a cultural focal point for our city and beyond."

— Nancy Rotering
Mayor of Highland Park

Lawrence Block
Founder and General Manager

Call 847.831.3622

Visit hpstrings.org



DR. ALLAN DENNIS, CONDUCTOR



Dr. Allan Dennis brings a rich heritage of experience and energy to the Highland Park Strings. He is the Founder, President, and conductor of both the Symphony and Concert Orchestras at the Midwest Young Artists Conservatory. For 36 years, he also served as Music Director of the Kankakee Valley Symphony Orchestra. With decades of experience motivating, rehearsing, and teaching both adults and young people, Dr. Dennis brings a wealth of knowledge and passion to the podium. In 2001, he was named **Music Director of the Year** by the Illinois Council of Orchestras, and he has recently been invited to conduct the **2026 Illinois All-State Honors Orchestra**. An avid chamber music coach, he received the **Heidi Castleman Award** from

Chamber Music America for excellence in chamber music teaching. Dr. Dennis has studied at the renowned **Tanglewood Institute** (2000 and 2004), and in 1996, he was selected as both an **Active Conductor** at the Festival of Sandpoint, Idaho, and a **Fellow** at the Conductor's Institute in South Carolina. He also has extensive experience conducting musical theater productions, operas, and ballets, and is in high demand as a guest conductor for festivals and all-state orchestras across the country. His conducting mentors include **Gunther Schuller**, **Harold Farberman**, and **David Effron**. He earned his doctorate with distinction from **Indiana University**, and holds both bachelor's and master's degrees from the **State University of New York at Fredonia**. He also studied at the **Eastman School of Music** and was awarded a **Performer's Certificate** from the **Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music** in Antwerp, Belgium. In 2017, Dr. Dennis received the **Cultural Leadership Award** from the Illinois Council of Orchestras—an honor granted to only seven arts leaders in Illinois over the past 25 years.



The Highland Park Strings, 1980

"Many many thanks to ...the Strings for all the years of truly wonderful concerts. The Strings are a real gem and true asset to the area. Every single concert has always been...of downtown caliber."

— Philip Bechen

OCTOBER 19

Bach Beethoven and Barber

3pm | Free Admission | Highland Park High School | 433 Vine Avenue

J.S. BACH

Suite No. 2 in B minor, BWV 1067

SAMUEL BARBER

Concerto for Violin, Op. 14

Yang Liu, Violin

LUDWIG van BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21



YANG LIU's playing has been praised as "a scorching performance!" by the New York Times and " ... from China, with dazzling talent!" by the Washington Post. He has performed as a soloist with world-leading orchestras including the Cincinnati, Atlanta, and St. Louis Symphonies as well as the Danish Royal Odense Philharmonic, to name a few. His award winning album *Song of Nostalgia* showcases his virtuosity and musicality. His repertoire ranges from baroque to the most contemporary works, and from western classical to eastern traditional. An avid advocate of cultural exchange via classical music, he is a founder of Yang and Olivia Foundation and Memento Virtuosi, a chamber ensemble of diverse ethnicity and instrumentation. Born in Qing Dao, China, Yang studied in Central Conservatory with Professor Yaoji Lin in Beijing China and College Conservatory of music in Cincinnati with

Professor Kurt Sassmannshaur and Dorothy Delay. Under the extraordinary ability immigration program, Mr. Liu became an American citizen in 2014.

"And then, as if that weren't enough, the...Strings took center stage with their dazzling rendition of Dvorak's Symphony No. 8...Dr. Allan Dennis conducted with a passion that translated into an electrifying performance. The orchestra's precision, dynamic range, and collective artistry showcased the depth of their musical prowess."

—Paul Clements, Highland Park Neighbors

"Yesterday's concert was magnificent. Congratulations on presenting to our community a concert that lifted our spirits and filled our souls."

—Charlene Podolsky

DECEMBER 7

All Brahms

3pm | Free Admission | Highland Park High School | 433 Vine Avenue

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Hungarian Dances

Concerto for Violin and Cello (Double Concerto) in A minor, Op. 102

Ilya Kaler, Violin & Daniel Kaler, Cello

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68



We are thrilled to welcome back violinist **ILYA KALER**. Described by Gramophone as a "magician, bewitching our ears", Mr. Kaler is the only violinist to win the Gold Medal at the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, the Sibelius Competition in Helsinki, and the Paganini Competition in Genoa. Mr Kaler has earned rave reviews for his solo appearances with many distinguished orchestras throughout the world, including the Leningrad. Moscow and Dresden Philharmonic Orchestras, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, the Danish and Berlin Radio Orchestras, as well as many of the major American Orchestras. One of the most sought after teachers in the world, Kaler currently serves as the violin professor of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Joining Mr. Kaler will be his son, cellist **DANIEL**. A top prizewinner at the Medici International Music competition, Bach International Music Competition and

Ravel Competition, among others, Daniel recently joined the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. The father and son will perform the great Double Concerto of Brahms and the Strings will play his beloved Symphony No. 1.

"I wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed the concert yesterday at Ravinia. It was the first time I was able to attend one of your concerts. The ability to offer a delightful music venue out in the suburbs was extraordinary."

—Roberta Washlow

"I hope my words can capture the joy that...the Strings brought to all of us fortunate enough to be at the concert yesterday. Neil joins me in saying thank you, thank you, thank you!!!"

—Lynne Samuels

FEBRUARY 1 ANNUAL BENEFIT

Gala Ravinia Concert – All Mozart

3pm | \$40 General Admission | Bennett Gordon Hall, Ravinia
Call 847-831-3622 for tickets.

WOLFGANG MOZART

Overture to The Marriage of Figaro, K. 492

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550

Concerto for 2 Pianos in E-flat major, K. 365

Susan Merdinger and Steven Greene, Pianos



SUSAN MERDINGER, an internationally acclaimed Steinway artist, and pianist **STEVEN GREENE**, newly appointed Music Director and Organist at Highland Park Presbyterian Church, first met at the Yale School of Music, where they were affectionately dubbed "*the Dynamic Duo*." Now celebrating their 40th anniversary as musical and life partners, the duo continues to enchant audiences with their powerful artistry, chemistry, and distinctive programming. Winners of two Global Music Awards, and First Prize in the Bradshaw and Buono International piano Competition Professional Duo Division, the Merdinger-Greene Duo has performed across the United States and abroad, presenting a wide range of repertoire from the classical canon to contemporary works and original arrangements. Their signature programs-*Famous Themes on Two Pianos* and *Romantic Reverie*-showcase not only their virtuosity and synchronicity, but also

their creativity and commitment to accessible, meaningful programming for audiences of all ages. Together, they exemplify a rare artistic partnership grounded in love, intellect, and a shared passion for music.

Bonus for Major Contributors

Show how important Strings concerts are to you and the community by making a contribution of \$100 or more. The Strings is exempt from federal income tax under Internal Revenue Code Section 501 (c) (3). You will receive a minimum of two tickets, preferred seating, listing in the Program Book, and free tickets to a Donor Appreciation Chamber Music Concert at 3pm on Sunday, April 19, at the Highland Park Community House.

MAY 17

A Rising Star – Bach to Garrop

3pm | Free Admission | Highland Park High School | 433 Vine Avenue

J.S. BACH

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat major, BWV 1051

MAX BRUCH

Concerto for Violin and Viola

Desiree Ruhstrat, Violin & Callia Murray, Viola

STACY GARROP

Krakatoa for Viola

Callia Murray, Viola

ANTONIN DVORAK

Serenade for Strings in D minor, Op. 44

CALLIA MURRAY is a 16 year old violist from Vernon Hills. She began studying violin at age 6 and viola at age 8. She currently studies with Jonathan Brown at the Colburn Music Academy in Los Angeles. Previously, she studied with her co-soloist today, Desiree Ruhstrat. Callia was Principal Viola with the Midwest Young Artists Conservatory Symphony Orchestra. She is a Young Arts Winner in the Classical Music/Viola Division in 2024 and a 2025 Winner of the DePaul National Viola Concerto Competition. Callia won the O'Malley Foundation National Concerto Competition as well as several other national competitions. Callia has competed in multiple chamber music competitions including the 2025 Fischhoff National competition where she won a bronze medal as a member of Quartetto Speranza. Additionally, her chamber groups won the Rembrandt, Glass City, and Chicago National chamber music competitions. Callia has attended numerous summer festivals including Tanglewood, Heifetz Institute and the Perlman Music Program.

We are honored to have **DESIREE RUHSTRAT** return for her seventh appearance with the Strings. Since her debut at age 12 with Lucas Foss and the Milwaukee Symphony, Ms. Ruhstrat has appeared as soloist with orchestras throughout the world, including the Berlin Radio, Gottingen, Colorado, Oregon, and Utah Symphonies, Radio Suisse Romande, and by special invitation of Sir Georg Solti in Chicago's Orchestra Hall. Ms. Ruhstrat has won numerous awards. She became the youngest prize winner at Switzerland's Tibor Varga International Competition and went on to earn top prizes at the Carl Flesch, Julius Stulberg, and Mozart Festival Violin Competitions.





Highland Park Strings

1601 Oakwood Avenue, #105
Highland Park, Illinois 60035

PRE-SORTED
STANDARD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT #126
ELGIN, IL

Residential Postal Patron
Highland Park, Illinois 60035



Highland Park Strings

47th Season | 2025-2026 | Dr. Allan Dennis, Conductor

October 19 – Bach, Beethoven and Barber | Highland Park High School

December 7 – All Brahms | Highland Park High School

February 1 (Benefit) – All Mozart | Bennett Gordon Hall, Ravinia

May 18 – A Rising Star – Bach to Garrop | Highland Park High School

Call 847.831.3622 | Visit hpstrings.org