

A Lifetime of Music



When **Rob Schumitzky '78** was seven years old, his public school invited the St. Louis Symphony to visit. Students were given the opportunity to try a variety of musical instruments at an assembly. Schumitzky's father loved classical music and their home frequently had music playing, so the first grader was intrigued. Schumitzky picked up a violin that day, and one could argue that he's never put it down. He soon outgrew his school's small strings program and, after his teachers gave positive feedback to his parents, he began private lessons. "It snowballed from there," he said.

Schumitzky is currently a member of the first violin section of Pacific Symphony, Concertmaster of the Long Beach Opera Orchestra, and a member of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra since its inception in 1991. He also performs regularly—when not in a pandemic—with the San Diego Symphony and records motion picture soundtracks. As a member of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra he has toured Japan on four occasions. He has performed with popular artists like Journey, Aerosmith, John Legend, Cyndi Lauper, Hugh Jackman, Stevie Wonder, and many others. And, with his wife, cellist Erin Breene, along with friend and pianist Ines Irawati, he has a piano trio. Aviara Trio performs on many west coast prestigious chamber music series. His whole life has been immersed in music, and he loves it.



The road from St. Louis to California had some interesting turns. Schumitzky's family moved to Creve Coeur after the 7th grade, and he became a student at Saint Louis Country Day School beginning with the eighth grade. The School worked with Schumitzky in his junior and senior years, allowing him to leave campus early several days each week in order to attend theory, ear training, and violin lessons at the St. Louis Conservatory of Music. Despite his dedication to improving his craft, he still found time to captain the School's riflery team.

Schumitzky in the 1978 Codasco yearbook.

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The 1978 Codosco Riflery Team went 7-3.

Once he settled into his new school, Schumitzky connected with classmates and teachers. He said, “I loved **Mr. Herbert Taylor** who taught math for many years. We had such great conversations. The first 20 minutes of class consisted of discussing the news of the day. He took me all the way through calculus in my senior year.” He also credits English teacher **Brian Taylor**, math teacher **Bill Werremeyer**, and art teacher **Bill Yonker**. He thrived in the disciplined atmosphere of CDS, which closely mirrored his family life. “My dad was a Colonel in General Patton’s Third Army during World War II, so we were very disciplined with a high attention to detail in the family, and I loved that about Country Day,” he said. “We could go as far as we wanted to go because we had the personal attention available to us all the time.”

He is still connected with many of the men in his graduating class. “We were all pretty tight, got along really well, and had a lot of fun.” He stays in touch with those classmates, even during a pandemic. A CDS Class of 1978 Zoom meeting has brought them together on occasion. His only regret from high school was

not participating in any of the school’s outdoor sports. “My schedule didn’t allow it because I was so invested in getting a head start on college courses offered at the St. Louis Conservatory.”

That college was the Juilliard School, where he continued his music education. After graduation, he found his first orchestra job playing with the Columbus Symphony in Ohio. Two years in, he received a call from home. A violinist with the St. Louis Symphony had injured her arm in a car accident and would he be interested in auditioning for a one-year position? He jumped at the opportunity and earned a place in the orchestra that he had listened to every Saturday night growing up. “I was playing with the musicians I idolized and took lessons from.” He considers it a great fortune that he was able to work with Leonard Slatkin during his first year. “He was and still is a musical legend in the conducting world. Fortunately for me, one year turned into four wonderful years where I gained valuable musical experiences.”

When the symphony decided to permanently fill this position, Schumitzky seized the opportunity to look into other auditions taking place around the country. Heading west was appealing, and he won a position with the newest major orchestra formed in the last fifty years, the Pacific Symphony. “My plan was to play a few seasons, cycle through orchestral repertoire, and move on.” During his first few years, he would drive back to St. Louis during the summer months to visit family and either play pops concerts with the St. Louis Symphony at Queeny Park, or play in the pit for the MUNY. What began as a temporary foray out to the west coast “turned into 30 years

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What Does a Concertmaster Do?

“The concertmaster acts as the voice between the musicians and music director throughout the rehearsal process. Everything gets filtered through the concertmaster so not everyone speaks at once,” explained Schumitzky. “The concertmaster also gets the parts for each upcoming piece weeks, sometimes months, in advance, knows how the piece goes and knows how he wants his section to play. He has to ‘bow’ all of the music for the other violinists. It’s not just having the skill set to play the instrument; you have to have the diplomacy to deal with the other 36 violins that sit behind you. Concertmasters are also in charge of violin auditions, and serve with other musicians on board committees. They choose players that fit the style that both they and the music director prefer. They walk the fine line of being on the musicians’ side while not overstepping the management profile.”

The Life of Schumitzky's Stradivarius

Schumitzky's Stradivarius has played in many concerts over its lifetime, including those in the 1800s with Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky conducting. The violin was played in London at the Silver Jubilee of George V of England. The instrument also made a tour of the United States and performed at the inauguration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. One interesting claim to fame is that the violin played the world premier, in 1905, of the Sibelius Violin Concerto in Berlin. These instruments usually carry the name of their most prominent owner, so Schumitzky's instrument is known as the ex-Halir Stradivarius. "Karel Halir, of Czech descent, was the violinist who debuted the Sibelius Concerto and is so revered in Prague that there is a society dedicated to him. They are in constant contact with me. When the Czech Philharmonic visited, on their most recent tour of the United States, a few musicians wanted to see the violin. Many major orchestras have invested in these instruments to loan to their musicians," said Schumitzky. "However, it takes quite a bit of philanthropy to put together the \$5-7 million in order to consider a purchase." He also noted that he never plays the Stradivarius at outdoor performances due to the many atmospheric variables. Instead, when he plays outside, he uses one of 15 copies of the ex-Halir Stradivarius made by noted Los Angeles violin-maker Michael Fischer.

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now which is incredible. I've lived here longer than I've lived anywhere," he said.

He and his wife still travel back to the midwest—St. Louis for him and Wisconsin for her—at Thanksgiving or over the winter holidays. Several years ago, a visit to Wisconsin resulted in the adoption of Romeo, a stray cat they discovered on daily walks. Romeo now happily resides in California, too, and keeps Schumitzky company while he waits for the pandemic to end and a return to the music he loves so much. He estimates it will take until sometime next year to play full orchestra concerts again, and he misses the camaraderie that comes with playing in a large orchestra. "It's not work," he said. "Yes, there is a business side to the music industry, but to be able to sit onstage in a 2000-seat concert hall, or an 18,000-seat venue like the Hollywood Bowl, I thank my lucky stars that I get to do what I do. Over thirty years and it has never felt like a job."

While it's hard for him to choose a favorite piece of music ("It's whatever I'm playing at the moment," he laughed), it's not hard for Schumitzky to choose his favorite instrument: his 1694 Stradivarius. How does one come into possession of such a rare instrument? Well, that's a good story, too. While working in St. Louis, he took his violin, made in 1732 by the Italian maker Domenico Montagnana, to be repaired. Schumitzky would stop into the violin shop to see the progress of the repairs. It just so happened that during one of these visits, a retired physician from Phoenix, Arizona, was passing through St. Louis on his way home from New York, toting a 1694 Stradivarius looking for prospective buyers. He didn't want to sell to a collector; he wanted a promising young musician to play the violin.

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Schumitzky was introduced to the doctor who agreed to let him borrow the Strad for that evening's symphony performance. He returned to the shop the next day with one question: "What will it take to own an instrument like this?" While Stradivarius violins now routinely sell in the millions, Schumitzky struck a deal with the physician that made it somewhat affordable. The Montagnana was repaired and sent to a violin-maker in Los Angeles, who was able to sell it and give Schumitzky the much-needed down payment. That left a significant amount owed. Schumitzky, with his mother's blessing and the consent of his four sisters, was able to set up a family loan. The rest he financed, and the violin, eight months later, was his. "My dad promised me that one day we would find me a great instrument," he said. His dream finally came true even after his father's passing from pancreatic cancer the year before. He also attributes the gift to his family. "I knew the instrument would have a tremendous impact on my career for years to come." He's had the Strad for over 30 years now, and he's still in awe that he gets to perform on it. "I am so fortunate that I own a great piece of musical history," he said. "This instrument is such a huge part of me now. There will be a time to pass it along to a young musician who will also use it, but right now I would be lost without this violin."

He has performed around the world, including the great concert halls of Vienna, Cologne, Lucerne, Munich, Hannover, Shanghai, Beijing, Tokyo, and the great Carnegie Hall in New York. "Music transcends nationality," he said. "You can go anywhere in the world and music is music, classical music is everywhere. You don't have to speak the same language but the musical language is the same."

Schumitzky hopes to bring his love of music back to MICDS, to share with the students studying today. "I see what is happening at MICDS, the value in the arts, and every kid should have the opportunity to be exposed to music, art, dance, and theater," he said, comparing it to many public schools that are forced to cut the arts when budgets are slim. The pandemic cut short his plans to return to campus this spring, but he looks forward to rescheduling when it's safe. In the meantime, he shares this message with the young musicians at his alma mater: "Play music and listen to music because you love it. Play in an orchestra or string quartet, or go into academia because you will make a wonderful teacher. Do it because you love it and can't live without it. Have other interests. I've always enjoyed playing ice hockey and my wife and I are foodies. We enjoy cooking, fine wine, and going out to our favorite restaurants. But if you truly love music, pursue some sort of profession in music. Music is not something to do just because you want a job. It takes a lot of practice to perform at a high level. Keep learning, improving your craft, and evolve. There are still things I'm learning and discovering even after many years of performing. I don't play the same way I played 10 years ago or 30 years ago. Learn from the people you're sitting around and playing with. Push yourself to think in different ways. Be open to criticism and new ideas."

"Every time I walk out onto the stage at Disney Hall, or the concert hall in Vienna, or Carnegie Hall, I shake my head and am so thankful that I get to do this for a living. I'm so, so fortunate."



Schumitzky learned to play hockey as a teenager and still enjoys the game today (when there is no pandemic).