

A Pioneer Press Publication

North grad featured by symphony Sunday

By DOROTHY ANDRIES
Classical Music Critic

The Northbrook Symphony Orchestra holds a special place in the community, and its concert Sunday afternoon will highlight an outstanding musician who grew up in the community.

Guest artist is cellist Joseph Johnson, formerly of the Minnesota Orchestra and now principal cello with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, who was raised in Northbrook and graduated from Glenbrook North. The program is something of a cello showcase, with Tchaikovsky's glorious "Variations on a Rococo Theme," Respighi's "Adagio and Variations for Cello," and Glazunov's "Song of the Minstrel."

"I sang on that stage," said Johnson of the Sheely Center for the Performing Arts. "I played 'Rhapsody in Blue' there on the piano and Kabalevsky's Cello Concerto there with the student orchestra."

He was even in the high school musicals, playing one of the many teenagers in "Bye Bye Birdie" and the priest in "Man of La Mancha."

"It will really be a thrill to

EVENT DETAILS

4 p.m. Sunday
Sheely Center for the Performing Arts
Glenbrook North High School
2300 Shermer Road, Northbrook.
tickets, \$37 to \$15 per adult; \$5 per child or student with valid ID.
Call (847) 272-0787 or visit www.northbrooksymphony.org

play there again," he said. "I'm looking forward to it."

An early start

Johnson comes to the world of music by nature and nurture. His mother, Linda Johnson, taught music for 32 years in Northbrook's School District 28, retiring from Westmoor Elementary School.

"Joe started piano in kindergarten," she said, "but at one point he told me he wanted to try the violin." When asked why, he replied, "because the violin plays the melody."

His mother gently mentioned that the cello often carried the melody as well. "We never pushed him into anything," she explained. "Our philosophy was to make opportunities possible and then let him choose what he want-



Cellist Joseph Johnson, shown with his mother Linda Johnson, will be guest soloist at the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra concert Sunday. — Jeff Krage/For Pioneer Press

ed to do."

Along about sixth grade, young Johnson chose the cello and began going to summer programs, including the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Grand Rapids, Michigan and Interlochen, also in Michigan. "He was in band and cho-

rus in elementary school and took advantage of everything that was offered in music at Glenbrook," Linda Johnson continued. That included playing in the high school orchestra and also branching

See **CELLIST**, page 11

CELLIST

Continued from page 5

out to the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra, a high-level ensemble of high school musicians that plays concerts in Orchestra Hall.

After high school Johnson did undergraduate work at Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. and got his master's degree from Northwestern University in Evanston. During that time he was back at Symphony Center serving as principal cellist of the Civic Orchestra and occasionally subbing with the Chicago Symphony.

Taking talent on the road

"Then I auditioned for the Minnesota Orchestra," Johnson continued. "It was my first audition ever and I ended up winning. It doesn't often happen like that."

After 11 years with Minnesota, he tried out for the spot as principal cellist with the Milwaukee Symphony, a first chair that had been open for a good four years.

"I didn't audition for it until I thought I was ready for a principal job," he said, "but I got it and I'm glad to be back — Milwaukee is much closer to home."

Johnson plays a cello made in 1792 by Nicola Gagliano of Naples, who also made other stringed instruments.

Surprisingly, conductor Larry Rapchak will hear Johnson play for the first time when they meet at rehearsal this week. But the soloist comes highly recommended. Charles Pikler, concertmaster of the Northbrook Symphony and principal violist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, plays every August in the Grand Teton Music Festival in Wyoming, where Johnson has been principal cellist for nine years.

"Charlie kept telling me that Johnson was fabulous and we should have him as a soloist," Rapchak said. "So we finally found a mutually acceptable date."

In addition to the three pieces for cello, the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra program also includes Prelude from "The School for Fathers" by Wolf-Ferrari, Bizet's Minuet from his "L'Arlesienne" Suite, Prokofiev's Gavotte from his Classical Symphony and "Variations on a Theme by Haydn" by Johannes Brahms.

"All the pieces on the program pay homage to the past musical styles or past composers," Rapchak explained. "And Joe Johnson was more than willing to learn some of the cello pieces to be part of this concert."

Maybe it was the opportunity to expand his repertoire, and just maybe, it was because it was a chance for Joseph Johnson to be back on the stage at Glenbrook North, where his musical life was so amply nourished.