

## SHARING A PASSION FOR FIDDLES, MAKER

**Author(s):** Cara Feinberg, Globe correspondent **Date:** December 5, 2002 **Page:** 4  
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LEXINGTON - For just a few times a year, the 30 members of Childsplay take leave from their everyday schedules and come together to play folk music concerts - driven by their love for music, for fiddles, and the Massachusetts man who made every one of their instruments.

Consisting of 30 fiddlers and classical violin players from around the world (and a panoply of guest performers including four guest fiddlers from Sweden, a Celtic harpist, a banjo player, an Irish step-dancer, and an Appalachian clog-dancer), Childsplay creates inventive, collaborative arrangements and lively versions of Irish, Swedish, Scottish, French Canadian, and Southern Appalachian traditional tunes. The group returns this weekend to Lexington's National Heritage Museum for its third annual concert, and museum staff members expect the house to be packed.

"They're just such terrific performers," said Pat MacMillan, the functions manager for the museum. "They've filled the house each time and made special marvelous matinee performances for children, as well. Our auditorium holds 400, and when [Childsplay] comes, the place just bursts."

As one of the few folk orchestras of its kind - and the only one to form in tribute to its instruments' maker - Childsplay enjoys a unique niche in the American music scene. "In this country, unlike places like Sweden, there isn't much of a tradition of fiddle players coming together," said Joe DeZarn, one of the founding members of the group. Fiddling "is a much more individual pursuit. So when we get together, it's like finding your long-lost twin - all 30 of them. People are on their best behavior; they set aside their daily grumbles, because they really value this. This is a place people come to discover what we can do together."

It's also one of the very few groups where professional classical musicians like Bonnie Bewick from the Boston Symphony Orchestra and part-time musicians like DeZarn perform together as equally valued contributors. "We are a group of fiddlers," said DeZarn, who in the "off season" works full time as a marketer for a kitchen-cabinet manufacturer in Virginia. "We love the music we play, and we love playing it together."

In the late 1980s, DeZarn was one of seven fiddlers from the D.C. area who discovered that they not only shared a love of folk music but that they all owned violins made by Bob Childs. "We got together on a lark," said DeZarn, who still plays with the group, "and we liked the music we made. We were all fiddlers for different contra dances around the city - something we knew Bob was passionate about as well. It just seemed fitting to pay tribute to him, so we made him our namesake and eventually asked him to join."

Now, almost 15 years later, Childsplay has more than two dozen members (including Childs) and two albums (one recorded in Lexington last year) and has played in concerts all over the world, including a folk festival in Farlun, Sweden, last summer. "This group is a great honor," Childs said in an interview in his Cambridge workshop - a small converted room on the top floor of his house, with shelves full of rough-hewn wood blocks and unfinished instrument parts. "Music is so much about emotional connections

anyway. I am thrilled to be part of a group that can re-create in music the personal connections we feel toward each other as people."

It's these connections that many Childsplay musicians describe as the linchpin of their success. "Bob would never take credit for it all, but he's the reason it all works," said Laurel Martin, a Boston-area Childsplay member for the past three years.

Originally a furniture maker and an avid fiddler, Childs began his violin-making career nearly 30 years ago in Maine, when he brought his own fiddle into a violin shop for repair.

"When I came back to pick it up, [the owner] pointed to his workbench and said, 'When are you coming back?' At first, I didn't realize he wanted to teach me his craft. . . . I just thought he was worried I'd keep busting my violin."

But Childs did come back and began the first of several apprenticeships to master violin makers around the country. He spent six years learning the art of making instruments and eventually moved to Cambridge to set up his own shop.

"Bob's violins have real guts," said DeZarn. "It's no surprise to me they're popular with people who play for dances, where they may be the only ones playing a melody. All his instruments sound very rich, almost dark, in the lower registers, and while they have a range of tones, they all have a very warm sound that is Childs."

"That's your goal," Childs explained, tapping two blocks of unfinished maple together. Though not yet instruments, the planed slabs already resonate warm tones. "You want to create a sound that is you," he said. "The artistry is in having your voice recognized - and appreciated - and made beautiful by the musicians playing it."