Jeffrey Krieger '85, principal cellist of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra (HSO), presented a free concert on Friday and Saturday, Nov. 16 and 17, at Mortensen Hall at the Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts. On the program was “A Wide Open Field,” a piece for electric cello that was composed for Krieger by Hartt Professor Robert Carl.

Krieger recently talked with Teresa Benvenuto Hinrichs ’99, public relations and audience development manager for the symphony, about how his desire for new sounds led him to the electric cello. “I am interested in new art, just new, new, new,” he said. “I am just fascinated with it.”

**TBH:** When did you first become interested in music and in the cello?

**JK:** When I was in fourth grade in Joliet, Ill. (outside Chicago), a nun who was doing a master's project went around to eight schools and started a string program. I picked the cello because of the way it looked. I didn't even hear what it sounded like. It was all visual because nobody actually ever played for us. They [the instruments] were just there on a blanket in the middle of the room.

**TBH:** Did you picture yourself becoming a musician then?

**JK:** Oh, yeah. From the very beginning...I didn't know about the major performance halls or anything. I just thought I'd be playing before throngs of people and they would want my autograph. It was real and exciting. I always liked making sound, even the squeaks and squawks, not even really playing pieces. I don't think I really wanted to be anything else.

**TBH:** Did your family help you?

**JK:** It was really a money issue for my family. My parents had five kids and believed in giving equally to each. My mother stayed home and my father worked in a factory, so there wasn't a lot of extra money. Fortunately, playing the cello—the lessons, rental, and everything—was really inexpensive at the time.

**TBH:** What were your music studies up until college?

**JK:** I had the worst training you could possibly have. When I got into high school, I couldn't play a note, and I played next to fantastic kids who had good private teachers. But I worked so hard that I was recommended for better teachers.

**TBH:** What was the high point of these years?

**JK:** I auditioned for a teacher who was also a cellist in the Chicago Symphony, and he accepted me as a student. That was the height of my career at the time. Chicago had a youth orchestra and the Civic Orchestra, which is known as the training orchestra of the Chicago Symphony. Every Saturday, I went with a group into Chicago for private lessons, then came back to Joliet and worked my after-school job to pay for my cello. It was such a mundane sort of existence because Joliet had no culture. The culture was the malls. So I was high on going to Chicago every weekend.

**TBH:** Why did you audition for The Hartt School?

**JK:** I studied with a cellist from the Chicago Symphony who helped sort of throw me together for college. I auditioned for Yano Starker at Indiana University, where I did get accepted, but he was not taking any more students. He had studied with David Wells at Hartt and recommended him because he knew I needed a lot of attention and had a lot of catching up to do. I went to Hartt for two-and-a-half years, then went back to Joliet and got a job working in a factory. I auditioned for the Spoleto Festival and could have gone to replace another cellist, but I needed the money from my factory job.

**TBH:** What brought you back to Hartt?

**JK:** I was fired because I wasn't suited to the factory job. So, I got myself together and came back to Hartford in 1978. I auditioned for the service orchestra of the HSO and got in and a year later got the principal job. That's what I really wanted to do rather than go back to college. But I did finish school. It took me 10 years to get my undergraduate degree, partly because I went part-time and had to put myself through. Then in 1985, I went to Yale and got my master's in music in performance.

**TBH:** Who influenced you during these years?

**JK:** My private teachers, like David Wells, have been a major influence on me. He was always there, inspirational. I always needed the one-on-one thing; I didn't do well in groups. There were other influences, like Frances-Marie Uitti, a famous American avant-garde cellist who lives in Europe. She came to campus during my freshman year and played the wildest concert I had ever heard from a classical musician. She played all contemporary music, written for her. I was really more interested in that stuff than in playing a Beethoven sonata.

**TBH:** What would you consider your greatest achievement while at Hartt?

**JK:** That's easy. I won the concerto competition during my junior year playing the Shostakovich Cello Concerto. My teacher while I was in high school, in the Chicago Symphony, did the premiere after Rostopovich, and I studied it with him. That really influenced my desire for new sounds. Shostakovich wrote all these great pieces for Rostopovich.
TBH: How did you become interested in the electric cello?

JK: It goes with my interest in contemporary music and new technology. I've always been interested in using tape recorders, and I had done a couple of pieces with my cello, miking it. I had a chance to try an electric cello when Robert Black and I attended a festival in New Hampshire and visited the musician who made e-cellos. Right away, I knew I wanted one, even just for fun. I could see so many possibilities. Six months after I started playing it, I did a concert at the Bronson & Hutensky Theater [TheaterWorks] downtown [Hartford].

TBH: Have you been able to promote electric cello music?

JK: One pivotal point was an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] Soloist Recital Grant in 1993 that let me play in music schools and do workshops across the United States. I took a year's leave of absence from the symphony and did about 30 concerts, co-sponsored by the schools. This grant program really helped start a lot of soloists, but the program has been stopped. It's so sad.

TBH: When you did your first concert, did you find a large repertoire for e-cello?

JK: Well, no. When I started playing, I did a score search through the American Music Center. I found about 60 pieces from all over the world by composers who thought their pieces might be adapted for e-cello, but only a couple were for cello hooked up to a processor or midi or something. I chose the best ones. Only one or two really exploited the instrument. After that, I started asking people to write pieces for me.

TBH: Who has composed for you?

JK: Almost everybody around town has written a piece for me. In fact, that's how the piece by Robert Carl (composer and Hartt professor) came about. He had sent a piece in the original bunch [of 60] and said, 'You know, I'd really like to write you a piece.' He wrote A Wide Open Field at the Millay Colony, an artists' retreat on the estate of poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, where a lot of composers go to write music. We performed it at Hartt about six years ago and a recording was made. I showed it to several composers, but no one performed it. I don't know why you wouldn't want to do it. It's so beautiful.

TBH: Have you had other collaborators?

JK: A group of us, including Greig Shearer [HSO principal flute] and Ron Krentzman [HSO assistant principal clarinet], recorded a piece by Ken Steen [composer and Hartt professor]. I got to do the New York City Ballet when a piece that I did got handed from friend to friend to friend, and this friend happened to be Robert LaFaust, a lead dancer for the ballet. Every couple of years they give young choreographers a chance to choose music for something new. LaFaust picked my piece, and I did a whole run on stage at the New York State Theater with the dancers. Then I also did the Saratoga Festival.

TBH: Have you recorded any CDs?

JK: I have two solo albums, one that just came out, and I've played pieces on four others.

TBH: Have you chosen as soloist on this program?

JK: Somebody mentioned my name at a programming committee meeting, and I was asked for pieces. Usually I'm banging on doors to get people to listen, but I didn't have to do anything. It was great. That's the way you want it to be. Finally, my fourth-grade dream has come true.