

MIT Announces:

Chisholm, Rivest, and Thompson appointed as new Institute Professors

A marine biologist who studies tiny ocean organisms, a computer scientist who developed a global security standard, and an acclaimed violist who has performed with renowned orchestras have been awarded MIT's highest faculty honor: the title of Institute Professor.

Sallie "Penny" Chisholm, Ron Rivest, and Marcus Thompson join a small group of Institute Professors at MIT, now numbering 13, along with 10 Institute Professors emeriti. Their new appointments are effective July 1, making them the first faculty members to be named Institute Professors since 2008.

MIT President L. Rafael Reif says, "Although our new Institute Professors were chosen as individuals, it is interesting to consider them together: Penny Chisholm, a pioneering field scientist whose discoveries revolutionized our understanding of the oceans; Ron Rivest, a brilliant theorist and problem-solver who ranks as one of the founding fathers of modern cryptography; and Marcus Thompson, among the most celebrated string performers in the United States today.

"Their fields could not be more different," Reif says. "Yet each is an explorer, creator, and teacher of the first order. Together they reflect the standard of faculty excellence that is a signature of MIT."

The appointments of Chisholm, Rivest, and Thompson as Institute Professors were announced today in an email to the faculty from Provost Martin Schmidt and Steven Hall, chair of the MIT faculty and a professor of aeronautics and astronautics.

"This special position is a unique honor bestowed by the Faculty and Administration of MIT," Schmidt and Hall wrote. "Such appointments recognize exceptional distinction by a combination of leadership, accomplishment, and service in the scholarly, educational, and general intellectual life of the Institute and wider community."

Marcus Thompson

"A native of the Bronx, Marcus Thompson has been an influential presence at MIT for over four decades, as both an internationally recognized concert musician and a lauded instructor. He began playing the violin at age 6, switched to the viola at age 17, and had embarked on an active concert career by age 22. Thompson arrived at MIT as an assistant professor of music in 1973, and was named the Robert R. Taylor Professor of Music in 1995—the same year he was named a Margaret MacVicar Faculty Fellow for exceptional teaching.

"Thompson's violin studies began at a private neighborhood studio and continued in the Juilliard Pre-College Division with noted instructor Louise Behrend. Following nearly a decade of study with violist Walter Trampler, Thompson received Juilliard's first doctoral degree in viola

performance. He studied chamber music with members of the Juilliard, Amadeus, and Netherlands string quartets, and with Joseph Gingold and Felix Galimir.

“Thompson first earned public attention as a solo and chamber music player following an acclaimed recital debut at New York’s Carnegie Hall in the Young Concert Artists Series, along with other appearances in New York and Boston. Since then, Thompson has performed as soloist with many of the most prominent orchestras in the US. He has recorded with orchestras in Ljubljana Slovenia and in Prague, and performed premieres of works by MIT colleagues, including the West Coast premiere of the Viola Concerto by John Harbison, with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra. Next season he will premiere a new work by MIT composer Elena Ruehr with the New Orchestra of Washington.

“A respected chamber musician, Thompson has appeared regularly at chamber music festivals and series on three continents, and frequently collaborated with groups including the Emerson, Jupiter, Borromeo, Muir, Calder, and Shanghai string quartets. He has served as artistic director of the Boston Chamber Music Society since 2009, where he has been hailed for innovative programming and artistic leadership.

“At MIT, Thompson has developed programs for the study and performance of solo repertoire and chamber music literature from five centuries. As a member of the viola faculty at the New England Conservatory of Music since 1983, Thompson has taught aspiring professionals who now hold positions in orchestras, chamber ensembles, and universities worldwide.”

“My initial reaction was that I was shocked, stunned, amazed,” Thompson says of learning of his appointment as an Institute Professor. “I’m also extremely grateful and humbled by the recognition not just of me but of the fact that there is music at MIT, and high-quality music. It’s a privilege to be at MIT, and to be recognized is just an honor.”

For Thompson, teaching is a reward in itself. He says he feels proudest witnessing the musical activity of former students, and he feels a special pride in meeting the younger siblings or children of former students who themselves play in MIT’s many ensembles. “For so many students,” Thompson says, “serious study of music is an integral part of Institute life, and often remains their most cherished memory of how we care for them. I see and hear music, fine music, great musicmaking, all over the Institute. Our students are very drawn to it, they’re very good at it, and it becomes part of their lifelong learning.”

“Over his long career, Marcus has worked to give students access to a world-class music program that has changed MIT,” says MIT Faculty Chair and Aeronautics and Astronautics Professor Steven Hall. “Many colleagues told us about his commitment to and generosity with students. Like Penny and Ron, Marcus is one of the great men and women of our faculty who inspire us every day.”