



ROCKPORT MUSIC *the Early Years*

Dawning of Deveau Era Boosts Festival's Prestige

The music of David Deveau “has moved me to tears,” says Nina Fieldsteel of the pianist hired as the new artistic director of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival in 1995. “While he’s always technically great, his heart comes through.”

Fieldsteel, a longtime board member, was among several interviewed for the Rockport Music Oral History Project’s look at the Festival as it entered the 1990s, its second decade.

A common theme in their views: Deveau was unquestionably the reason for the growth of the Festival—and its ascension in esteem in the wider chamber music world.

The 1990s also saw the Festival make a firm commitment to educational outreach with music enrichment talks and performances in Cape Ann schools. And while the Festival had always relied on a corps of dedicated volunteers, it would eventually unite them into the Friends of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival (RCMF) and give them a voice on board matters.

Deveau’s hiring followed a time fraught with worry about Festival programming. The artistic director, the late Lila Deis—a vibrant soprano and co-founder of the RCMF—was valued for the tireless work she contributed.

But amid concerns that ticket sales lagged when singing was on the program, the board asked her to limit her appearances in favor of the instrumental works that defined the chamber-music repertory.

Former board member Robert Randolph, said, “There was a point at which [the Festival] ... would be limited if Lila either didn’t change her approach or let somebody else do it.” When the board and Ms. Deis could not come to an agreement, she left the organization.

Board member Philip Cutter said the issue caused “a lot of anguish” on the board. “It was somewhat acrimonious,” he said, adding that some board members stepped down as a result.

A six-member search committee charged with finding a replacement contacted classical music organizations in New York and Boston. Mary Ruth Sole, a committee member, says Deveau’s name “kept popping up.” She said the late Robert Koff, a founding member of the Juilliard String Quartet, was among several who recommended Deveau. “This man is a fine musician ... a wonderful colleague, and more importantly, he is a fine human being,” Sole recalls Mr. Koff saying.

Others were considered. But when the committee attended a Deveau concert in Boston, “We looked at each other as he started to play, smiled and said, ‘Yes, I think this is the person’. He stood head and shoulders above the other people we were looking at,” Sole remembers.

For Deveau’s part, he recalls: “I was minding my own business one night and had a voice mail from Mary Ruth Sole.... She asked if I would have any interest in becoming a candidate for artistic director. And at the time I was teaching both at MIT, where I’m still on the



Pianist Andrew Rangell presents a Family Concert in the 1999 Festival on Poulenc's Babar the Elephant.



Mary Ruth Sole, Janet Plotkin, and Phil Cutter—three of the volunteers who helped grow the Festival in the early years.

music faculty, but also commuting weekly to Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh.

“My first inclination was to say, ‘Thank you very much. I’m flattered, but no.’ Then

I thought maybe that was a good way for me to step away from Carnegie Mellon and do something that would not involve airline travel every week. I thought about it, called her back, and said, ‘Tell me about the job.’ So she described the position and I thought, well, this is something that would afford me an opportunity to create a vision and bring it to life.”

Deveau says he went through “a pretty grueling set of interviews” with the board. “There were a lot of very pointed and specific questions.”

He drew up a position paper, he said, “to say what things I thought a music festival should include, how I would go about booking artists, and so forth. And they liked having all these bullet points. But then [they] said, ‘Okay, how are you going to do all this?’ I remember specifically Bob Ellis, who was on the board at that time.... He saw me about two years after I was hired and said, ‘You know, you’ve created every one of the things you said you were going to do on that position paper.’ He was one of the people who grilled me the most, and I thought, that’s fantastic!”

Finances in the 1990s were touch-and-go, but still better than the early days when bake sales and picnic suppers supplemented ticket sales, or a last-minute check from a local donor would rescue the Festival from doom.

Former board member Dianne Anderson said that by 1995 the budget stood at \$73,538; it rose to \$143,220 by 1998.

Not until April 1994, with the hiring of Kathy Pomfret, would the Festival have an office administrator. Pomfret, who was close to retiring as an executive at the Gillette Company, answered a want-ad in the *Gloucester Daily Times*. At first, she worked 10 hours a week most of the year, then as much as 60 hours during the Festival’s summer season. The office, she said, was in “a cellar in a house on Dock Square: A “damp, dark, dank place.” Pomfret was paid \$7,000 in her first year.

The sale of 100 seats for a concert was “reason to celebrate,” she said. But with Deveau’s arrival, ticket sales became brisk, with the hall often filled to overflowing for many concerts.



New Festival administrator Kathy Pomfret receives flowers of appreciation.

Reflecting on 36 years...



David Deveau preparing for performance with the Biava String Quartet in the 1990's.

"Word got around that there was really good music in Rockport," Pomfret said. Though the official fire department capacity for the hall—the Rockport Art Association—was just 242, the demand for tickets resulted in squeezing customers in every corner of the place, Pomfret added.

"By David's second year, we got 365 [patrons] ... people were so wanting to get in that I was actually putting people on the stairway outside by the entrance to the hall, charging ten dollars for seats for the stairs in the courtyard, just to accommodate interest and demand. I was walking around with ten-dollar bills in my pocket ... It was crazy!" Pomfret remained in the post until 1998.

Board member Philip Cutter said of Deveau: "As David stayed here longer and longer, the level of professionalism went up to [grade] A. I don't even want to say A minus. It went up to A ... with more and more performers who had national reputations."

Other former board members as well as visiting musicians credit Deveau for expanding the breadth of the Festival's chamber-music repertoire.

Violinist and violist Barry Shiffman, co-founder of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, recalls performing

during the third week of the 1996 Festival. "One of my strongest memories is performing the 3rd string quartet of R. Murray Schafer. The Quartet had begun talking about [performing] this theatrical work that involved entrances and exits for the musicians from various places in the hall, loud rhythmic chanting and screaming, and general mayhem!

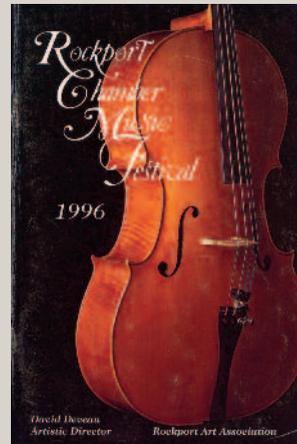
"I remember that we were very concerned that the audience would be too conservative for the Schafer quartet and I mentioned this to David when we arrived. David was not concerned.

"The hall was full and the closeness of the audience meant that this performance would heighten the volatile nature of the Schafer as screams and yells would be literally a couple feet away from the audience. The Quartet was now really concerned that this would be too close to the action and we wondered whether we should tone down our performance, or even change the choice of repertoire. 'Toning down' was not our comfort zone, and so we presented the quartet with all its craziness, to an audience that did not know us, and had never heard anything like this work."

Shiffman added: "It was very hot and when the performance ended, Geoff, our first violinist, was totally soaked from sweat. The audience was so enthusiastic with many people coming up and asking to see the score. David was right. There was nothing to fear from the ears of Rockport listeners."

At the end of this year, David Deveau will retire as Rockport Music's

A page from the 1996 Rockport Chamber Music Festival program book for the St. Lawrence String Quartet performance.



The 1996 Rockport Chamber Music Festival program cover—David Deveau's first Festival as artistic director.



artistic director to devote more time to his performing and recording career. He will be succeeded by Barry Shiffman, who is now director-designate.

From the Festival's first season, in 1982, it was undergirded by volunteers, mostly local people who raised funds, set up chairs, housed visiting musicians, or hosted picnic suppers and so on. By decade's end, the volunteers would be organized into the Friends of the Rockport Music Festival.

Former board member Janet Plotkin remembers bringing the group to life in 1999. Names were entered on a computer list and a mailer went out to about 100 people, asking \$10 for a family membership. "The response was overwhelming," she said. "We had a dinner at the Emerson Inn at the end of the [2000] season. It was a fabulous night. David played the grand piano in the living room."

Deveau said, "The volunteerism aspect was just breathtaking when I first joined, because at the time there was just a part-time administrator and me. And so the board and other volunteers did absolutely everything: moving chairs, baking goods—it was really a 'mom and pop' organization at that time."

Though outreach had always been a priority with the Festival—with visiting musicians giving talks, performing on street corners and at family concerts—its education

Left to right: Violinist Andrés Cárdenes, cellist Anne Martindale Williams, and pianist David Deveau—a stellar trio to this day!

After enjoying a Family Concert, a boy thanks one of the string quartet members.

mission flourished in the Deveau years, noted Barbara Sparks, a former board member. Since he was Boston-based, she said, "he could get musicians ... to go to the schools."

Cameron Smith, a former board president of RCMF, said Deveau made visiting local schools a condition in performers' contracts.

The Rockport Chamber Music Festival closed out its second decade with a small website, on sounder financial footing, and with artistic vision of greater scope and ambition. As an eminent New England musical oasis, its place was firm.

Unbeknownst at the time, the Festival had laid the groundwork for the opening, just a decade later, of the Shalin Liu Performance Center, a \$20-million seaside venue of matchless beauty and wide acclaim. A Festival that once relied on cookie sales had come a long way. No question.

—By the Rockport Music Oral History Project: Michael Pardee (writer), Nina Fieldsteel, Ruth Shane, Jean Rees, Ruth Fritz, Richard Tennant, Jean Woodbury. The project was founded by the late John Sparks, a longtime Rockport Music board member.

This is the second article in a series based on the Oral History Project's interviews with people involved in the Rockport Chamber Music Festival over the past 36 years. This story with additional details is also available online at rockportmusic.org/press along with the previous articles in the series.

