

# The New York Times

Friday June 11, 2010

## Summery Sounds of a New Hall Opening

By James R. Oestreich



Photo: Michael Lutch for The New York Times.

Rockport Chamber Music Festival opening the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, Mass., on Thursday evening.

ROCKPORT, Mass. — New England teems with modest chamber music festivals each summer, and from a distance many look attractive if not always immediately distinguishable. The Rockport Chamber Music Festival in this town 40 miles north of Boston (not to be confused with, say, the Bay Chamber Concerts in Rockport and Rockland, Me.) has just set itself apart from the crowd with a striking new home, the Shalin Liu Performance Center, which the festival inaugurated on Thursday evening to open its 29th season.

The center was designed by Epstein Joslin Architects of Cambridge, Mass., and Kirkegaard Associates, the acousticians from Chicago, whose principals Alan Joslin and Lawrence Kirkegaard were involved in a major triumph at the other end of Massachusetts in 1994, the construction of Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood. The

smaller-scale Shalin Liu center consists mainly of an intimate 330-seat concert hall, beautiful to the eye as well as to the ear.

It is, publicity materials quaintly note, “between the Atlantic Ocean and Main Street,” and it was conceived to blend seamlessly with both. The facade more or less recreates that of the 1870s Haskins Building, which the center replaced, and looks like a storefront, complete with an awning rather than a marquee. The stage is backed by a two-story window that gives a panoramic view of the harbor, Sandy Bay.

For New Yorkers the effect might be compared to that of Bargemusic, with its sight line through the stage to the buildings of Lower Manhattan, or to the Allen Room of Jazz at Lincoln Center, with its view onto 59th Street and Central Park. But the setting, remote and uncitified, offers fewer distractions, at least when the waters are calm. (In a not wholly reassuring reminder of the possibilities, the window is said by a festival representative to be “100 percent hurricane-proof.”)

The hall’s interior was designed by Deborah Epstein to reflect the natural setting in materials, largely wood and stone, and colors, and by Mr. Kirkegaard to reflect and disperse the sound. What Mr. Kirkegaard wanted, he said in a film shown before the concert, was “a sparkly, clean window to the sound,” and he has achieved it.



Photo: Michael Lutch for The New York Times.

The performance center’s exterior looks like a storefront.

To open the hall, David Deveau, the pianist who has been artistic director of the festival since 1995, chose works that in some sense related to dedications of homes. In addition to Scott Wheeler’s Piano Trio No. 4 (“Granite Coast”), commissioned for the occasion, the program included Wagner’s “Siegfried Idyll,” a paean to domesticity at his Villa Tribschen, near Lucerne, Switzerland, and Copland’s “Appalachian Spring,” which tells of a young couple setting up a household of its own.

Those older works were doubly significant in pointing up the expansion in the festival’s repertory made possible by the new hall. The stage of the festival’s former home, the nearby Rockport Art Association, could accommodate only six performers and a grand piano, Mr. Deveau said in the film. The forces for the Wagner and Copland pieces — each performed in its original version, using 13 players — fitted comfortably on the stage here.

But the performances of the larger works, anchored by the Borromeo String Quartet and conducted by Bruce Hangen, were sometimes scrappy. Excellent acoustics can cut two ways for performers, and French horn players in particular can be sure that, given the seaside setting, wags will delight in pointing out “clams,” as horn flubs are known in the trade; there were plenty of them here in the Wagner. Paula Robison, the flutist, and especially William Hudgins, the principal clarinetist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, had lovely moments in the Copland.

Mr. Wheeler’s work received a fine performance from Mr. Deveau; Bayla Keyes, the violinist; and Michael Reynolds, the cellist. Mr. Wheeler pretty much avoided unified trio writing until the finale, sometimes letting the string players interact but generally keeping the piano on a different plane. Instead, he turned the occasion into an inventive intellectual exercise, full of allusions and references that would mostly escape the casual listener.

Each of the three movements begins with a musical “spelling” of the name Shalin Liu, assigning notes for letters. Ms. Liu, who was born in Taiwan, was the lead donor in the \$20 million campaign for the center, using family money earned in high-technology enterprises. In the work’s first movement, “Coastline With Figures,” the strings play wavelike, rocking figures as the piano roams through a vaguely pentatonic-sounding melody in octaves that also “spells” the names of friends of Ms. Liu’s.

The second movement, “Summer Star,” incorporates a Chinese melody beloved by Ms. Liu, and the violinist seems to be riffing on the Sea Interludes from Britten’s opera “Peter Grimes.” The finale, “Celebration by the Water,” “spells” yet another name, that of Mr. Deveau, and as the pianist slams a granitic curtain down on the work, the strings continue with a little screeching coda evoking seagulls, in this case recalling the ones that had flown by the window just moments before. Mr. Wheeler could hardly have planned it better.

- *The Rockport Chamber Music Festival runs through July 18 at the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, Mass.; (978) 546-7391, [rockportmusic.org](http://rockportmusic.org).*

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- A version of this review appeared in print on June 12, 2010, on page C1 of the New York edition.

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