

The New York Times

Sunday June 13, 2010

Taking a New Concert Hall Out for a Spin or Two

By James R. Oestreich



Michael Lutch for The New York Times.

The Borromeo String Quartet at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival.

ROCKPORT, Mass. — With good reason, congratulations flew in all directions as the Rockport Chamber Music Festival continued its opening weekend at its remarkable new home, the Shalin Liu Performance Center in this quaint seaside town 40 miles north of Boston, on Friday and Saturday evenings. But not every eminence was on hand to accept the accolades.

The acoustician Lawrence Kirkegaard, the first designer brought into the project by a board of trustees that clearly had its priorities straight, was said to be in Europe over the weekend, embroiled in his next venture. It takes a lot of self-assurance for an acoustician to walk away from a showcase opening, trusting that all will go well, and Mr. Kirkegaard comes by his confidence rightly, having accumulated a string of successes.

At [Tanglewood](#) in western Massachusetts in 1994 Mr. Kirkegaard worked acoustical magic with [Seiji Ozawa](#) Concert Hall, an auditorium that sounds equally fine with a back wall or — when it is opened to picnickers on the lawn — without. Shalin Liu, though a small hall seating only 330, posed major challenges of its own when it was decided to leave the rear of the stage open to a panoramic view of the harbor through a two-story window. (Acoustics may have come first, but there was certainly no stinting on visual effects by Epstein Joslin Architects.)

Part of the trick was to make the acoustics work in the first place with a huge sheet of glass dominating a wall crucial to the reflection and dispersion of sound. But here, in addition, was another case that required sleight of hand with alternative settings.

In daytime the light coming through the window can be too bright for the comfort of performers and audience; after dark, typically all that can be seen in the window are the reflections of the lights in the hall. So large standing screens of thin wood woven in soft wavelike patterns can be deployed as shutters, as they were for the second half of each concert on Thursday through Saturday, and also for the first half on Saturday.

Although some who have heard tests in the hall claim to hear differences — a slightly warmer sound, perhaps, with the window covered — the scanty evidence of three concerts cast both deployments in a similar light. The acoustics were superb either way (though one viewer, at least, preferred the open sight line, whether there was anything substantial to see or not).

After the opening concert, already reported on, the repertory was well calculated to test the dynamic extremes. On Friday the big, burly pianist [Garrick Ohlsson](#), who can easily fill any hall with booming sonority, played [Chopin](#). A canny professional, he managed to scale down his sound while also grappling with a Steinway piano still new enough that the action may have been a little stiff (to judge from some of the rippling passagework in the Opus 28 Preludes, taken at blistering tempos).

Blazing bravura pianism was to be expected from Mr. Ohlsson, but he was at least as impressive in the subtleties of the assorted Chopin pieces in the first half of the program, particularly in quiet changes of harmony, exquisitely prepared and breathtakingly executed. As often as Mr. Ohlsson has played some of these works (very often indeed), he seemed genuinely to be sharing the listener's surprise and delight in whatever inventive turn would come next.

On Saturday evening the Borromeo String Quartet and the pianist Gilles Vonsattel played another bravura work, Brahms's F minor Piano Quintet, but they gave it a relatively intimate treatment in keeping with the nature of the space rather than the quasi-symphonic treatment that can serve it so well in a larger hall. The Borromeo players also offered a fetching account of [Beethoven](#)'s String Quartet No. 2 in G.

But the piece that revealed the most about the acoustics was altogether more modest: Mark Kilstofte's "Quartette," for string quartet, a 1988 memorial to a friend, David O'Dell, a conductor and violist, in four brief movements. The

first and second begin and end at the edge of audibility, but the sound was either distinctly present or not, with no blurring.

Might the sound have been slightly better (hard to see how) or worse without the shutters? That is for the festival to find out. Now it has not only a great little hall but a wonderful laboratory for experimentation, with — so far, it seems — each result outdoing the one before.

The Rockport Chamber Music Festival continues through July 18 in Rockport, Mass.; (978) 546-7391 or rcmf.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 14, 2010, on page C2 of the National edition.

Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company