



ROCKPORT MUSIC *the Early Years*

Volunteer harmony was key to Festival growth in early years

When pianist Constance Emmerich came to town in June 1982 to play in the first Rockport Chamber Music Festival, she told co-founder David Alpher, "If you stick with this for ten years, it will succeed if for no other reason than it becomes a habit."

Succeed it did—over and over again. Commencing its 35th season, the Festival is proof of an enduring brand loyalty: Superb music in a seaside setting is a welcome habit for many.



*Constance Emmerich
preparing for a concert*

The Oral History Project of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival (RCMF) interviewed many who helped shape the organization in its first decade. Townspeople and summer visitors alike set up seats and sold tickets; baked dozens of cookies; or like many innkeepers, provided rooms for visiting musicians. Finances were usually scant, sometimes critically so, but volunteers persisted in efforts to keep the little music box afloat.

The first two-week season opened June 3, in the gallery of the Rockport Art Association (RAA). It featured the Annapolis Brass Quintet, An die Musik (Ms. Emmerich's group), the American String Quartet, and the New York Bach Ensemble. Just three or four tickets were sold in advance, yet 80 people paid six dollars at the door and sat on wooden chairs in the unairconditioned room. At intermissions, cookies went for a dollar. Torrential rains accompanied much of the Festival, lending staccato notes from the roof of the gallery, a former barn.

Nothing could dampen the optimism of the three founders, the late Lila Deis, a performer with a luscious soprano voice; Alpher, a composer/pianist; and businessman Paul Sylva, who raised the seed money.



*Eleanor Hoy, the Festival's
first treasurer*

Eleanor Hoy, then manager of Toad Hall Bookstore, was the Festival's first treasurer. She recalls Sylva asking local businesses and individuals to put up \$500 to back the first season. About \$5,000 was collected. But, adds Hoy, "We were always short on money. Oh boy, were we short on money." Often, there wasn't money to pay the per-diems to the musicians on Monday



*The founders (from
left to right): David
Alpher, Paul Sylva,
and Lila Deis*



About town on the Rockport Trolley: David Alpher, Lila Deis, and visiting musicians

mornings. But then, recalls Hoy, "A person I can't name, would slip me something." Such were the hardscrabble, yet hope-filled days of the early RCMF.

Sylva, a former social worker, owned The Framery, an art-framing enterprise around the corner from the concert hall. He recollects asking for that "ungodly sum of five hundred dollars to sponsor a concert." But as word spread about the endeavor, the Rockport community

became "a very, very big part of the Festival." Many people who hadn't listened to much classical music came to the Festival because musicians were staying with them or with friends. And many, Sylva maintains, would become major financial contributors.

Sylva said the programming that Ms. Deis and Mr. Alpher arranged—of groups performing separately, and then with each other—produced music unique to the occasion. "Some of it was sheer magic. Some of it was a disaster."

After getting an undergraduate degree in music, Alpher went to law school and practiced for several years in New York City. He then "sneaked back" into music. When the RCMF began, he drew up the bylaws and the filings for its not-for-profit status, all pro bono. At times, he lived in town and managed the Festival from a downtown office donated by a board member. "It was dark and smelled of decades of standing water," said Alpher. "But it was all we had, and we were grateful. I was its only staffer."

Alpher also befriended the late Robert J. Lurtsema, legendary radio host of WGBH's *Morning Pro Musica*. "I composed a piece for him, *The Walrus and the Carpenter* ... which he premiered {narrated} at the RCMF in 1989, and also did live on his program ... this brought us a very large amount of publicity on a station that was listened to by every classical-music devotee in New England," he said.

Sylva's Framery buzzed with Festival activity, with musicians practicing in upstairs art studios and people dropping by with offers to help. Christine Lovgren—a long-time volunteer—remembers Sylva telling her about the new concert series. She volunteered to tune the rented Steinway. During intermissions, she and Sylva found ten audience members to help move the 950-pound instrument off the stage.



Lila Deis, Ann Fisk (director of the Rockport Art Association), and a concert patron



Elena Ivanina and Daniel Rothmuller rehearsing in the RAA

the allure of the new classical-music series, they eventually settled in Rockport for retirement. "We had been coming in August for many years," said Nina Fieldsteel, "but then we got a call from a friend in the town, who said we must come in June to take in these wonderful concerts. So, we would drive the five-and-half hours, up and back again."

In the early 1980s, Susan Gray and her husband Alec Dingee, then Winchester residents, were avid chamber music-goers in the Boston area. When Gray saw a 1983 *Boston Globe* item about the Rockport festival, they decided to "drive up one day and see what it's like. We were charmed by it ... it was lovely to hear high-quality music in a very unpretentious, comfortable place in a beautiful town," she said. In 1986, the couple

moved to Rockport, and in 1989 Gray accepted an offer to join the RCMF board. At her first meeting, a vote was needed on whether the RCMF should continue; a majority voted yes.

Barbara and John Sparks, frequent day-trippers to Rockport, decided to live in the town because of its village ambiance and vibrant arts scene. "When we learned there'd be chamber music

here," Barbara said, "we thought we'd died and gone to heaven."

Dianne Anderson, who was on the founding board with her husband Charles, said there were no paid employees, though Ms. Deis and Mr. Alpher drew small stipends after the first year. Musicians helped the Festival raise funds by attending "cultivation parties," social gatherings aimed at wooing financial backers.



Dianne Anderson

Cellist Daniel Rothmuller, of An die Musik, came in one day with his Stradivarius. When Sylva remarked how beautiful the instrument sounded, Rothmuller said, "It should. It's {worth} about two and a half million dollars." Sylva asked him when he was going to get the scratches on the rare instrument taken care of. The cellist said he couldn't, because "they were made by Napoleon." "So I said, Napoleon, like Bonaparte?" Rothmuller said one of Napoleon's generals had owned it.

In an email, Robert Suggs, a trumpet player with the Annapolis Quartet, fondly recalled Rockport's welcoming manner. "It was a real pleasure to spend our days alternately holding open rehearsals and taking in the local atmosphere."

Patricia Fiero (a former state legislator) and her husband, Dr. Douglas Fiero, were among the growing legion of Cape Ann residents who became ardent Festival backers. "You had the sense that you were doing something new and different and exciting, breaking some ground," she said.

Ira and Nina Fieldsteel typified a fair number of the early Festival devotees and contributors—people who lived in Manhattan or Boston and regularly summered on Cape Ann. Drawn by



Barbara and John Sparks

Reflecting on 35 years...



Founder Lila Deis and Priscilla Deck at a reception

On Friday evenings, she said, chowder suppers were held at The Framery, with guests sitting at saw-horse tables. Robert and Jan Randolph regularly hosted musicians in

their Rockport home, and took part in winter trips that served as Festival fund-raisers to concerts in New York City.

Former board member Max Levi found those days thrilling. The board, he said, “did everything, and I loved it.”

Priscilla Deck, another engaged patron, mused about being a page-turner for pianist Alpher. She paid rapt attention to his eyes as he followed the score. But at points he’d close his eyes, “and I’d go, oh my God, what do I do?” she recalls.

Festival programs from the 1980s regularly cite its growing critical acclaim. This from 1985: “With a growing audience coming from all over New England, the 1983 season saw the Festival’s first sold-out concert and the *Boston Globe* praised the ‘outstanding performances.’”

The Festival’s first major grant was from the Polaroid Foundation. By the mid- to late 1980s, financial gifts were coming from several sources, including Cape Ann businesses, family foundations, the National Endowment for the Arts, Continental Airlines, the Xerox Corporation, and others.

Ms. Deis and Mr. Alpher, the co-founders, were not unknowns in chamber music. *The New York Times* once wrote admiringly of a performance the two gave in the city: “The pleasure derived from the singing of the soprano Lila Deis ... was of the sort not often found in New York concert halls.”

Members of the ensemble Voices of Change take in a summer day in Rockport

The two eventually stepped down from their Festival posts—Mr. Alpher in 1991, and Ms. Deis in 1995. In 2010, Lila Deis died of cancer.

Over the next decade, the Festival blossomed creatively, showcasing new works along with music at the heart of the chamber music repertoire. Fund shortages would on occasion be worrisome. No matter. The board, the co-directors, and volunteers would see to it that the Festival not only kept going but continued to explore new creative horizons.

Unforeseen was this: their achievements would one day make possible Rockport Music, an organization that would build the \$20-million Shalin Liu Performance Center. Situated just kitty-corner across from the Art Association, this acoustically splendid venue at the sea would promote multi-genre music programs while staying true to its chamber music roots. Soon, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter would help let the world know that performers like Yo-Yo Ma, Dave Brubeck, Wynton Marsalis, and The Kingston Trio would be coming to town.

Habit forming? Check that box.

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This is the first article in a series based on the Oral History Project’s interviews with people involved in the Rockport Chamber Music Festival over the past 35 years.

