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A full-page photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light blue checkered shirt and dark blue trousers. He is holding a violin in his left hand and a bow in his right. The word "MUSIC" is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the image, partially obscuring the man's torso. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

MUSIC

MAN

Rockport Music's new artistic director, Barry Shiffman, aims to connect the audience with live arts.

IT'S A WARM SUNDAY MORNING

inside Rockport Music's Shalin Liu Performance Center, and couples, grandparents, toddlers, and teens sit rapt as a string quartet plays Haydn. Behind the performers, through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back of the stage, paddleboats glide by and seagulls wheel over the waters of Rockport Harbor. The musical notes ring out loud and clear as the audience basks in the honeyed glow of this stunning American walnut timbered hall. Even when guests tiptoe out to use the restroom, they don't miss a beat; the halls and restrooms have speakers piping in the music.

"I haven't played in all of the halls in America, but it doesn't get much better than this," says Barry Shiffman, a world-class violinist and viola player, who became Rockport Music's artistic director this past September. "Many halls are great but have big flaws. For example, you play in a great-sounding space, but it was built to hold 1,100 seats, or 900. That's not the size of the space in which much of the music we present was intended to be heard. With each foot that you step

BY VICTORIA ABBOTT RICCARDI | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON TADIELLO

Barry Shiffman, a world-class violinist and viola player, became Rockport Music's artistic director this past September.



back from the performer, you are becoming that much more disconnected from what's happening on the stage. So, to present concerts in a hall that is only 330 seats with such a glorious acoustic and physical setting is very special. I feel like I've been given keys to the biggest sandbox."

It was Shiffman's musician friend, Geoff Nuttall, who suggested Shiffman apply for the artistic director job previously held by David Deveau, who after 22 years with Rockport Music decided to step down to focus on his own piano performances and recordings.

"I said, 'Rockport? Geoff, what are you talking about?'" recalls Shiffman. "And then Geoff said, 'Don't you remember Rockport,

where we used to play? It's unbelievable.' I said, 'Geoff'—because while I loved playing the concerts for the association, what I remember was that there were 200 people jammed in a small room, and I wasn't getting excited about the idea of planning a bunch of concerts in that space."

"And Geoff said, 'No, no, no, no. They built this new hall. They built the best chamber music hall in America. You've got to see this place.' And if Geoff says that, it means a lot. So, I quickly looked up the position and saw that the Rockport Chamber Music Festival that I had remembered had become this much larger organization with this incredible space, and it seemed potentially like a very good fit. So, I

went through the process and was very happy to be offered the opportunity to lead."

Indeed, Rockport Music had humble beginnings. It was founded in 1981 as the Rockport Chamber Music Festival, a two-week summer event featuring eight concerts. Now, 36 years later, under the umbrella of Rockport Music, the festival runs for six weeks and features 24 concerts, along with family concerts, open rehearsals, master classes, and lectures. Bookending the festival, Rockport Music presents an annual roster of jazz, folk, pop, and world music, as well as a jazz festival in August. As artistic director, Shiffman plans the Rockport Chamber Music Festival and oversees all classical presentations throughout the year—

Above, David Deveau, exiting artistic director and pianist; Andrés Cárdenes, violinist; Anne Martindale Williams, cellist; and Barry Shiffman, violinist—performing the finale concert to the Rockport Chamber Music Festival on July 9, 2017.

Right, (from left), Artistic director designate Barry Shiffman, Board of Trustees chair Susanne Guyer, and executive director Tony Beadle.



about one concert a month. Executive director Tony Beadle oversees the other programming.

"My role is to pick up where David left off," says Shiffman, who has a very different Rolodex from his predecessor, having grown up in Toronto. "I have access to the best performers of our time, but I am not just going to focus on the top-tier players. I am also interested in emerging artists and those at the top of their careers." The challenge and fun, Shiffman adds, is to figure out which musicians should play together to create a riveting mix.

"People think that classical music is a bunch of old fogies in tails, because music is so deeply entrenched in etiquette," he says. "But music is about emotion. A great concert should stop you in your tracks and emotionally connect you to what's happening. So much of life we experience in a passive way. Technology and easy access to music piped into every room in the house means that music can just meld into the background. But here [in this concert hall], we can shake you out of that and remind you to connect with the arts—live arts."

While Shiffman's first classical season has already begun, upcoming concerts will feature the Grammy Award-winning Ying Quartet collaborating with Grammy Award-winning cellist Zuill Bailey and Shiffman on viola (November 19), followed by renowned cellist Clemens Hagen playing with Grammy Award-winning pianist Kirill Gerstein (March 16). Vocal programs include a holiday concert by Cantus (December 10), heralded as "the premiere men's vocal ensemble in America" (*Fanfare* magazine), along with soprano Dawn Upshaw, a five-time Grammy Award-winning opera and stage star, with pianist



Gil Kalish (April 22).

"I'm very interested in the audience experience, because when they're engaged, they have a direct impact on the art making," says Shiffman, who made his debut with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra when he was 15 years old and then co-founded the St. Lawrence String Quartet in 1989 at the age of 22. "As a musician, you can really feel the vibe in the house. It's where science and the spiritual meet. You feel the energy come back from the audience, and when the notes go out, the music becomes heightened, better, and more charged."

Throughout the Classical Season, Shiffman will remain in Toronto with his wife and two young girls and fly down for meetings and

concerts. He also will continue to serve as associate dean and director of chamber music at the Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto and dean of the Phil and Eli Taylor Performance Academy for Young Artists. But come next summer, he and his family will be in Rockport for the festival—a stay he welcomes.

"One of the attractions of the job was the beauty of this place for my family," says Shiffman. "I love the architecture, and the girls would be happy to spend all day at the beach." He gestures out the window to Rockport Harbor, glinting in the morning sun. "I mean, look at this place," he says, obviously awed. "It's just crazy beautiful. And now, I get to work here." **n/s**



CONTACT

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rockportmusic.org