A RETROSPECTIVE
by the Oral History Committee

A Home of Their Own
Rockport Chamber Music Festival Prepares to Build a Performance Center

ON OPENING NIGHT OF THE 2005 CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL (RCMF), PHIL CUTTER, CHAIR OF THE NEWLY FORMED CAMPAIGN committee, addressed the audience. Looking forward to the 25th anniversary in 2006, he spoke of the organization's goal to raise $5 million to ensure artistic quality, provide working capital and establish a building fund. "We want to intensify our efforts which began nearly eight years ago...to secure a fitting, permanent home for the Festival."

A few months earlier, the organization had learned that the Haskins Building was for sale. Built in the early 1860's, and rising three stories, the Haskins Building occupied a prominent spot on Rockport's Main Street. By the 1880's, the top floor was used for "sociables" hosted by the Sandy Bay Yacht Club and other community functions. By 1974 use of the third floor social hall had been discontinued and many of the dramatic Second Empire features had been covered by aluminum siding. The street level commercial space was occupied by the Madras Shop, a popular clothing store.

Despite its age and awkward attempts at modernization, the Haskins Building offered the essential elements of a new home for the RCMF: a building in the center of Rockport just steps from its home at the Rockport Art Association, a seaside location with the potential for water views, and space for both a concert hall and social gathering space.

A few months later, an unexpected offer came from an anonymous donor – $50,000 to hire renowned acoustician Lawrence Kirkegaard to assess the building's suitability for a concert hall. Kirkegaard passed first judgment on the feasibility of turning the Haskins Building into a concert hall and proclaimed, "I think you've got enough space here."

With funds approved for preliminary design work, the list of potential candidates was narrowed to eight and then to four. Among the finalists was the newly formed firm Epstein Joslin Architects. Recalling Epstein and Joslin's presentation to the selection committee, Barbara Sparks explained "They submitted a proposal that just blew us away."

An attempt was made to utilize the existing Haskins building, but due to issues or limitations with building mass and shape of the original building, it was clear that the Haskins Building would need to be razed.

Having determined the ideal footprint, the next major decision was on which floors to locate the concert hall. It was determined that the advantage of joining ocean, performance and street life by way of windows at both ends of the concert hall was ideal. In addition, the new exterior design brought elements to recreate the Second Empire aesthetic integrating the building with the public life of the town. Plans for the new building were revealed in April 2006 at which time construction costs had risen to $12 million from an earlier estimate of $8 million.

As fundraising efforts gathered momentum, Phil Cutter and his wife Eve became acquainted with Shalin Liu as a prospective donor. Having never attended the Festival concerts, Shalin was unfamiliar with RCMF, but as a philanthropist she had dreams of supporting the creation of a concert hall. Phil and Eve introduced her to RCMF Artistic Director David Deveau and to the architects. Inspired by Alan Joslin's
design for the hall with its view out to the ocean, bringing nature inside, she became one of the "early angel" donors with her naming gift for the performance center.

In March 2007, with construction costs now estimated at $17 million, RCMF submitted a grant application to the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC) Facilities Fund. Although the proposal was rejected, the organization had gained the attention of MCC's new executive director Anita Walker who arranged to meet with members of the board. Walker acknowledged that RCMF was an organization with a history, a donor base and experience in successful fundraising. RCMF had shown it knew, on a smaller scale, what was required to sustainably run a non-profit organization. "But," Walker observed, "[without] the due diligence, ...the feasibility study, and the business plan to support the vision, it could go off the rails in short order." Walker recommended that the organization complete a business plan with additional market research and reapply to the Facilities Fund – MCC awarded a Feasibility and Technical Assistance grant to this end.

With architectural and fundraising plans developed, RCMF began its public relations efforts. The community was eager to know what would replace the historic Haskins Building. Carol Ciulla, Box Office Manager, recalled Saturday morning public presentations at the building. "We would set up the chairs, open the doors and let the town come in. They could ask us questions and Alan would give a presentation – he [was] just fabulous at it – and they fielded questions and complaints."

On May 1, 2007, RCMF submitted its application for zoning relief to the Rockport Board of Appeals. Three public hearings were held through late May and June, as well as additional public hearings for abutters. Following approval of the Site Plan by the Planning Board, the Board of Appeals granted the necessary special permits on August 6. Peter Bergholtz, then chairman of the Board of Appeals, said of the Board's deliberation, "I think they got [a] thorough questioning, ...as a group, there wasn't anyone not in favor of...doing this."

Despite approvals from the Planning Board and the Board of Appeals in August 2007, it would be another 15 months before demolition could begin. Owners of the property abutting the Haskins Building erected obstacles which included claiming non-compliance with zoning set-backs. With a proposal for a Cultural Overlay District addressing the problem, RCMF was prepared to bring this to a vote before the Town Meeting. On May 8, 2008, having reached a resolution with the abutter moments before the Town Meeting began, Bill Hausman, a member of the board, recounted the dramatic moment. As the meeting began, and with a pre-arranged nod to the moderator, Hausman rose to announce the settlement "and the packed house erupted with applause..."

Forty months after Phil Cutter's original announcement, the primary item on the RCMF board meeting agenda of September 18, 2008, was whether to go forward with the demolition of the Haskins building and begin construction of the Shalin Liu Performance Center. Major hurdles had been cleared — yet there remained one last hurdle. The cost of building had increased to $20 million and at this point only $13 million had been raised. At the meeting there was intense discussion—some board members urged caution, others voiced a strong degree of confidence in meeting the goal, others spoke of "taking a leap of faith." The vote was taken. The minutes of the meeting record: "The unanimous vote to go forward was celebrated with a round of champagne..."

On September 29, 2008, the stock market crashed. On Tuesday, November 18, with several dozen Rockporters on hand to witness the event, the shell of the Haskins Building fell with a crash.

BY THE ROCKPORT MUSIC ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE: Ruth Shane Iwritter, Frank Berson, Robert Cassidy, Jean Rees, Richard Tennant, Jean Woodbury and Margaret Ziering.

Founded by the late John Sparks, a longtime Rockport music board member, the Oral History Project has conducted, recorded, and preserved over 50 interviews with former and current Rockport Music trustees, volunteers, staff, and members of the Rockport community. This is the fourth article in the series.

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