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Rockport Music welcomes season in striking new home by the sea

By Jeremy Eichler



Bruce Hangen conducts a performance of Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll" at the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport Thursday night. (Michael J. Lutch)

ROCKPORT — Once upon a time the Rockport Chamber Music Festival held its concerts in a local gallery space well suited to viewing paintings but not ideal for chamber music, given its small stage, poor sightlines, limited ventilation, and acoustics that were less than flattering.

That, in fact, was only last summer, yet it already feels like ages ago. This year, the festival has moved to a beautiful new venue that is just across the street from its former home but seems a universe away. On Thursday night, Rockport Music proudly inaugurated the Shalin Liu Performance Center, marking the beginning of its summer season and what should be a new era for the festival itself.

The \$20 million hall was designed by Epstein Joslin Architects and the acoustician Larry Kirkegaard, the team involved in creating Tanglewood's Ozawa Hall, and you can feel the family resemblance between the spaces. Inside, the new hall is visually striking yet it still exudes a core warmth thanks to the intimacy of its scale — it holds 330 people — and the tonal palette of the walnut wood and Douglas fir used in its construction. The interior walls are lined with untold numbers of tiny flat stones, introducing a vaguely Eastern element. But the pièce de résistance is the massive window at the back of the stage that looks out directly onto Rockport Harbor.

The sound is important — we'll get to that — but so is the general frame of mind that a concert space can induce in a listener. And at least Thursday night, this space conjured a sense of calm focus. It is a hall for serious listening —

and yet it rejects the notion that such listening requires a hermetic seal from the world outside. Even when large wooden screens are slid across the window, the light penetrates through small openings in the basket weave of the wood, reminding you that this music is buttressed by sea and sky.

In conceiving the opening set of concerts, artistic director David Deveau aimed for maximum sonic range. On Thursday night, Deveau and two colleagues gave the premiere of Scott Wheeler's attractive, jaggedly lyrical Piano Trio No. 4, "Granite Coast," and Bruce Hangen led a small chamber orchestra, whose ranks included members of the BSO and the Borromeo Quartet, in Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll" and Copland's "Appalachian Spring."

One can't conclusively judge acoustics after a single concert taken in from just one spot in the hall, but generally, the sound is clear and resonant, with midrange tones particularly well served. Bassoonist Richard Svododa's mahogany tone in the Copland had an almost tactile presence. But the festival will also surely continue its "tuning" of the hall all summer. How the musicians are positioned on stage seems to make a significant difference in the sonic profile, as does, possibly, the window exposure — whether or not the glass is covered with the wooden screens.

In the Wagner, played with the glass exposed, the ensemble blend was not ideal, with certain lines jumping out and others falling away. The group sound in the Copland, performed with the glass covered, seemed to cohere more effectively. (Many other factors of course could have been in play.) The sound in the Wheeler trio, whose dimensions are more representative of most Rockport programming, was reassuringly vivid.

The ears will learn more about this space at each performance. But it's clear already that this is an essential new venue for the Boston area, perfectly scaled for chamber music. The hall is already transforming the summer festival, and it will open up major possibilities for year-round programming. Now the question is, what does Rockport Music want to become?