



ROCKPORT MUSIC *the Early Years*

Even Without Room to Grow, an Acclaimed Festival Flourished



The Rockport Chamber Music Festival (RCMF) neared the year 2000 with a reputation as one of the most vibrant arts organizations in the Cape Ann area.

Since his appointment as artistic director in 1995, David Deveau presented a month-long summer festival that featured artists of luminosity, performing works from the time-honored classical chamber repertory, as well as works by emerging artists.

As former RCMF board member Mary Hintlian recalls, "We couldn't believe that in little Rockport we were listening to the music that (Deveau) was presenting We feel he is responsible for raising this organization to the level where it is." Hintlian was among several interviewed for the Rockport Music Oral History Project's look at the Festival's early decades.

While critics were writing admiring reviews of the little Festival by the shore, ticket demand—and the overselling of seats—soon posed a quandary. Since its debut season in 1982, concerts were held in rented space at the Rockport Art Association (RAA). Performers and patrons were amiably shoehorned into an art gallery that seated some 240 in armless chairs. Open seating had been in effect since the beginning of the Festival, but patrons grew unhappy with having to arrive early and wait in line in order to grab preferred seats.

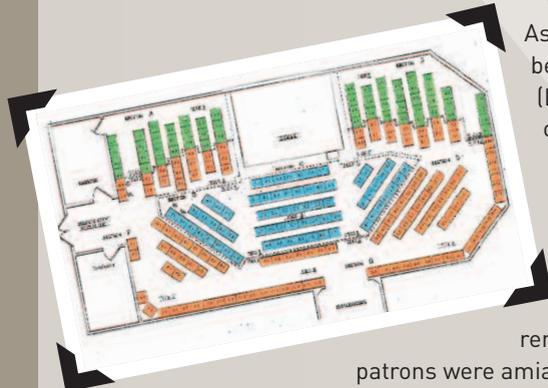
Former board member Barbara Sparks said the organization addressed the problem by fashioning covers for chair backs to reserve seats for special patrons. But, she said, "So many seats would be covered that the general public would say, 'There are no seats for us.'" Her husband, the late John Sparks, created a floor plan for 248 seats. "[For] every concert [John] and some volunteers would set up the seats. Everything was measured and labeled. The ticket was a contract. ... It made all the difference."

By 1999, the RCMF board began to seriously reckon with the space issue. Board member Philip Cutter remembers: "We were growing, attracting a higher level of performers ... but organizations can't remain static." Besides the seat issue, the building lacked air conditioning and handicap accessibility.

Carol Ciulla was hired as the box office manager for the first year in which reserved seating was implemented. Patrons were asked to indicate their seat preferences on ticket order forms. "There was no software, everything was done by hand," Ciulla said. Even so, the demand for tickets began to overtake the number of



Patrons entering the Rockport Art Association for a Festival concert.



Seating chart for the Rockport Art Association concerts



Rose and Bill Hausman attending a special event for the Festival.

seats available. Cutter noted, "We couldn't grow [as an organization] because we couldn't put anymore people in the space."

William Hausman, a former RCMF treasurer, said the Festival was willing to pay to remodel the hall. An architect mapped out a plan to add a small balcony at the back of the room, and add central heating and air conditioning—all of which was going

to cost about \$600,000, Hausman said. But the RAA was unwilling to accept the proposal.

So the quest began for other locations on Cape Ann—to either rent or buy—a prospect that "clearly carried with it enormous financial implications," Hausman added.

Beyond a daunting price tag for a new home, some board members were simply opposed to leaving the Festival's long-time home. The cozy art gallery, with its cache of music in an intimate setting, was an atmosphere keenly anticipated by regular concertgoers. A few members, like Wally Rowe, were so against a move that they declined further terms as a board member. Today, with Rockport Music ensconced in a sparkling performance center, Rowe looks back and says, "Of course I was wrong. And I couldn't be happier that I was wrong."

Among alternate sites scoped out were a tract near Gloucester's Ravenswood Park; Windhover Performance Center, in the Pigeon Cove area of Rockport; the Blacksmith Shop restaurant; and Rockport Lodge, a former summer guest house in town. Each was found wanting, for reasons from price to structural issues. Many board members found the harborside restaurant alluring, but converting the property would mean replacing the piers, a process that would require approval from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Even as it grappled with the site issue, the Festival, by 2000, was increasing its presence in the community through outreach programs in the public schools. Prior to that, occasional school assemblies offered by the Festival would bring a musical performance to a large audience of children, but their success in engaging the students' interest was limited. As Cameron Smith, former RCMF board member and Rockport school volunteer recalls, "[We wanted] musical events to move from dragging kids to the auditorium... instead we wanted intimate engagement with young performers after significant preparation." Joining the RCMF board in that year, Stephanie Woolf, herself a music educator and currently Rockport Music's director of education and outreach, wanted to provide programs that would expose children to music that they weren't



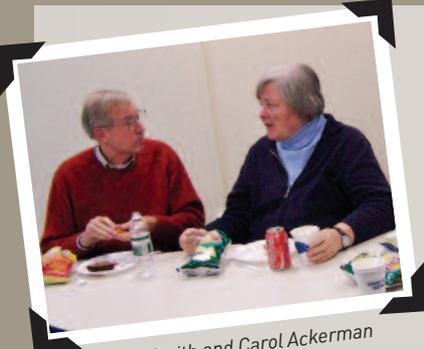
The Parker Quartet performing for school children as part of the Rockport Chamber Music Festival's education and outreach programs.



Rockport Art Association



Reflecting on 37 years...



Cameron Smith and Carol Ackerman busy at a planning meeting.

hearing elsewhere. Fran Pierce, Rockport's elementary school music teacher, recalls being invited to a meeting to discuss educational programming. Woolf was also at this gathering. "This is the first time I

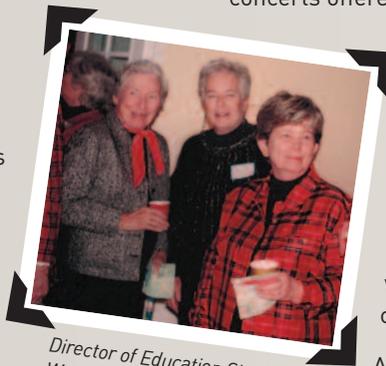
remember talking about

how to go about organizing

more school programs and how to make an effective program," said Pierce.

In discussing how to proceed, they agreed that preparing the children for a performance was the key to success. Woolf wanted the programs to be interactive and to widen the children's musical horizons with a variety of genres so that they could pick what interested them. Pierce prepared the students a week in advance of a performance using material Woolf provided, including notes on composers and sometimes CD recordings by the featured group. Pierce says, "I did a lot of preparation. I took a lot of time talking about the instruments—anything I could do to make it meaningful."

An intimate setting was created by limiting the audience to a particular grade level and holding the performance in the music classroom with children sitting on the floor in front of the



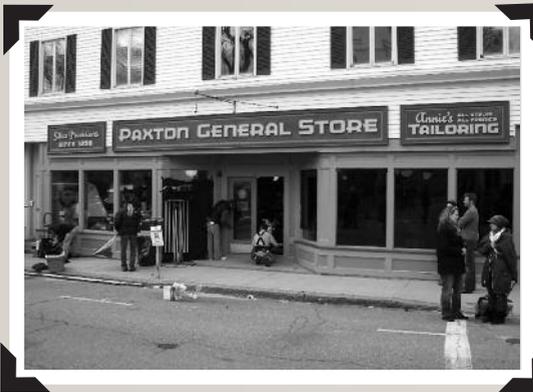
Director of Education Stephanie Woolf (far right) at an event with Mary Ruth Sole (center) and Mary Allen (left).

performers. Sometimes other teachers would stop by and stand at the back of the classroom. "I remember having the Parker String Quartet come to my music room. I was so excited! I thought that was amazing," says Pierce. When Carol Ackerman joined the RCMF board in 2003 she became the chair of the newly organized Education and Outreach committee. Ms. Ackerman, who passed away last year, recalled in an interview, that the goal was to "bring live music up close and personal to the students so that they [could] interact with it even if it was just by listening." With success in securing small grants, the committee expanded the number of school concerts offered in a year and began to explore taking concerts to the elementary schools in nearby Gloucester. Although organizationally more challenging because there are multiple elementary schools in Gloucester, Ms. Ackerman said, "We started to stick our toe into coming to Gloucester. And they were thrilled to have the music come to them."

A thrill of a different sort was ahead for the Festival. Enter the year 2005—and a 133-year-old former department store, just across from the RAA. On the waterfront site would be built the Shalin Liu Performance Center: a roomy space for patrons, the musicians and their soaring notes.

—By the Rockport Music Oral History Project: Michael Pardee (writer), Ruth Shane, Ruth Fritz, Jean Rees, Richard Tennant, Jean Woodbury.

The project was founded by the late John Sparks, a longtime Rockport music board member. This is the third article in a series drawn from the Oral History Project's interviews with people involved in the Rockport Chamber Music Festival over the past 37 years. This story is also available online at rockportmusic.org/press along with the previous articles in the series.



A photo of the Haskins Building while being used as part of the set for the movie The Proposal and would eventually become the site of the Shalin Liu Performance Center.