

A life in poetry

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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The Rockport Chamber Music Festival certainly has brought a lot of Cape Ann to the Shalin Liu Performance Center stage this season. First, it was the world premiere of Charles Shadle's piano trio "Dogtown Common," performed on opening weekend. And now this Saturday, the festival welcomes back RCMF co-founder David Alpher with his own new work, "Between Twilights," based on seven poems by Mardsen Hartley.

IF YOU GO

WHO: David Alpher

WHERE: Rockport Chamber Music Festival, Shalin Liu Performance Center, 37 Main St., Rockport

WHEN: Saturday, June 24, 8 p.m.

TICKETS: \$35-\$49 INFO: 978-546-7391; www.rockportmusic.org

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Hartley, best known as a painter, was a prolific poet as well. His thick volume of collected works has many poems composed while he lived on Cape Ann, in the early part of the 20th century. Alpher has chosen seven of those poems, creating a setting for baritone and piano.

When asked how he chose from Hartley's lifetime of writing - he wrote poems as a kind of diary, prolifically describing his life and his surroundings - Alpher said, "If there was an easy way, you would take the greatest poems and get to work. But sometimes it's other poems, not the greatest ones, which work best as songs.

"Look at Schubert," Alpher says. "He set great and terrible poems side by side. He made them great.

"The process is really quite mysterious. I go through volumes and anthologies, and you might find a poem here or there. Even after you finish it, you're not sure how it's going work."

This project began with the singer, bass-baritone Robert Osborne. "He's a colleague of mine at Vassar," where Osborne is an adjunct artist, and Alpher piano accompanist. "He started talking to me about Hartley as a poet - at the time I was astounded, because I only knew him as a painter.

"I know Robert's voice very well, and yes, I was writing for him," he says. "But they will work for anyone who sings in that range." Alpher avoided trying to bring his impressions of Hartley's paintings into this composition. "I chose to absorb myself completely in the atmosphere of the words," he says.

"I didn't want to write another 'Meninas Variations' this time," referring to his popular 1985 composition based on Picasso's visual variations on a painting of Velasquez. "I did that in response to the paintings; here I stayed away from the artwork."

Alpher composed the set individually, and afterward created a sequence - and a title. "I worked on the order a lot," he says, "and in the end, the first and last poems are sunset, evening pieces. So the title 'Between Twilights' came to me.

"It's not a cycle, and so there's no story that runs through the songs. But they do follow a downward arc, with the poem 'Wingaersheek Beach' at the nadir, in the middle. It's a scary, difficult poem that I don't think you can really understand. It creates a world of great loneliness, and even terror.

"But the songs creep back up after that, and the set ends exactly as it began, in a natural, placid twilight. The two songs at the beginning and end act as bookends."

Alpher also created the rest of program that surrounds his world premiere - "David Deveau gave me carte blanche," he says - and chose an additional pair of Vassar colleagues to join him. Violinist Stephanie Chase and cellist Sophie Shao will perform, with Alpher at the piano, in trios by Mozart (B-flat major, K. 502) and Schumann (D minor, op. 63).

"This will make it an all-Vassar evening," he says. "I don't think I've ever played these trios in Rockport, but I've played them before and after in other places."

Keith Powers is a freelance writer who covers music and the arts. Follow him on Twitter [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith) or email him at keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com.

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