

# REVIEW: David Alpher brings world premiere to Rockport Chamber Music Festival

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**By Keith Powers / Correspondent**

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The final commission of artistic director David Deveau's tenure at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival explored the simple verities of the natural world. Composer David Alpher, co-founder of the festival in 1981, returned to the Shalin Liu Performance Center Saturday evening, June 24, to present "Between Twilights," his settings of seven poems by Marsden Hartley. The premiere featured baritone Robert Osborne, who brought the songs to life with a straightforward, facile style and musical insight. Alpher accompanied at the piano.

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The songs are not a cycle, in the sense of a narrative. Chosen from Hartley's large, lifelong output, Alpher set texts that ranged from intimate views of nature — a nesting mouse, pipers and eagles — to broader sweeps, like the introductory and concluding poems, which focus on evening light (thus the title).

As a unit, “Between Twilights” is a modest group, quiet and tuneful. Appropriate in every manner, the music explores drama when the words explore drama, humor when the words do also, horror and mystery when the text does as well.

Alpher said “I chose to absorb myself completely in the atmosphere of the words,” and that was borne out in the music.

There are no frills in Hartley’s poems. That doesn’t mean they don’t have sensibility, and character, or generosity. Rising to a crescendo in the opening “Summer Evening,” the score picks the exact moment when the sun peaks, then disappears, to proclaim its musical drama. In “The Eagle Wants No Friends,” a stuck rest at “isolation” silently emphasizes the raptors elegance and solitary dominion.

Humor creeps in — a lighthearted, trilled accompaniment, Osborne singing sprechstimme with an antic air — in “Salutations to a Mouse,” in which Hartley finds, to his delight, that a mouse has wintered over in a sheaf of Hartley’s own poems.

“Wingarsheek Beach” finds anguish in simplicity — the seeming comparison of a single white seashell on the beach to terror and abandonment. The words and music do the same, with Osborne at his dramatic best in this setting.

The concluding “Robin Hood Cove” sums up the set with Hartley’s words: “I receive my width of grace from you.” Following the poet’s lead, Alpher has set these texts with integrity and clarity. No verses were repeated — avoiding excessive interpretive emphasis. The accompaniment supported the singer’s artistry, and shunned ostentation.

Osborne was an appropriate choice as interpreter — in range, and in manner. His instrument is clear, straight, lyrical in a bold way. He sang with little vibrato, certainly no coloratura flourishes, but with an instinct that made the settings sound organic.

Alpher teamed with cellist Sophie Shao and violinist Stephanie Chase for two major trios that completed the program: Mozart’s B-flat major (K. 502), and Schumann’s D minor, Op. 63. Mozart’s elegant trio balances the three instruments, with moments of exuberant counterpoint. The long middle movement was played with emotional conviction, but much of this very demanding trio seemed worked through, rather than explored.

Schumann's trio, Romantic to a fault, was highlighted by its scherzo, opening and closing with an unusual galloping dotted line, played almost entirely in unison. The middle trio section built contrast with simple rising and falling scales. Shao played beautifully, especially a long cello line that highlighted the slow third movement.

The Rockport Chamber Music Festival continues through July 9. Upcoming concerts include an appearance by the Boston Symphony Chamber Players (June 30), pianist Garrick Ohlsson (July 6), and David Deveau's final appearance as artistic director in the festival's concluding concert. For tickets and information visit [www.rockportmusic.org](http://www.rockportmusic.org) or call 978-546-7391.

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