

## 'Laying it on the line'

**Friday**

Posted at 1:57 PM

Updated at 1:57 PM

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

If you go...

**WHAT:** Matthew Sharp, cellist/bass-baritone

**WHERE:** St. Anna's Chapel, 166 High St., Newburyport

**WHEN:** Saturday, May 13, 7:30 p.m.

**TICKETS:** \$32. Under 18, \$11.50. Visit [www.newburyportchambermusic.org](http://www.newburyportchambermusic.org) or call 978-701-4914.

Let's not even try for a single description. Cellist. Actor. Singer. Musician. Director. Artist.

Don't choose any; choose all.

Matthew Sharp brings every aspect of his professional life to Newburyport this Saturday, performing at St. Anna's Chapel in an off-season presentation of the Newburyport Chamber Music Festival.

The British performer has carved his own path. He plays the cello — with orchestras, premiering works by Hans Gál, Errollyn Wallen, performing Hindemith and others. He sings — operatic performances with England's Orchestra of Opera North and Almeida Opera. He has works commissioned for his dual skills by John Tavener, Stephen Deazley and others.

He collaborates with a number of chamber musicians. And he directs: he's in the process of staging Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony — he also sings the baritone part — with the English Symphony Orchestra, with whom he has been artist-in-association since 2015.

“The cello seed and the singing seed were sewn at the same time,” he says. “I did a lot of theater when I was a kid, and I started playing cello when I was 6. Then the cello took over when I was 11 or 12. When my voice started to break, the cello really took over. But then when I was 17 I sang for Galina Vishnevskaya (operatic soprano, and wife of cellist Mstislav Rostropovich), and that dream never really left.”

Of course the repertory for baritone-cellist is largely nonexistent, so to combine his two instruments Sharp needs to commission works, or to arrange them himself. The works written for him have taken unusual turns — like a one-man opera on a bus.

That's right — on a bus. On his Newburyport program Sharp plays “Faustus — The Last Bus Home,” a collaboration between composer Stephen Deazley and librettist Martin Riley. No buses involved this time — but at its premiere, at 2012's Out of the Box festival in Scotland, that's exactly how it got “staged.”

“It's an amazing work,” Sharp says, “on a bus. The audience is actually on a tour heading to the festival, and along the way I flag down the bus, and it picks me up. Splattered in mud, with my cello.

“I sing an aria and tell my story to the other passengers,” he says. “It's powerful and dark, and to me curiously relevant. It's about a man who is under stress, and he's collapsed the world of Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II. He's sold his soul, and starts drawing parallels to Christopher Marlowe and himself. And he's afraid.

“Without giving it away, in the end I give up my cello, and wallet and passport to the other passengers, and get off the bus in the woods. But another man gets off the bus and follows me ominously. All this happens while we're snaking our way through the Aberdeen countryside.

“The cello music is simple and strong — right on the money. It's a dense and surreal work, and it doesn't explain itself all the time. And it all happens in a kind of volcanic fifteen minutes.”

The rest of the program sounds just as striking — if not quite as unusual. Works for voice and cello by Giovanni Sollima and Tavener — settings of poetry by George Seferis — and the more tradition first cello suite of Benjamin Britten, open the concert. Sharp follows “Faustus” with a collection of songs from Cole Porter, Jacques Brel and Wagner — “arranged by me for multi-track cello and voice” — and then some Piazzolla.

Every performance should be an intense, one-of-a-kind event, and for Sharp that’s exactly what he strives for. “Laying it on the line,” he says. “Performing like there’s no tomorrow, and that this is for one night only.” That’s what to expect Saturday evening.

Cellist/baritone Matthew Sharp performs on Saturday, May 13, at St. Anna’s Chapel in Newburyport, part of the Newburyport Chamber Music Festival. For tickets and information visit [www.newburyportchambermusic.org](http://www.newburyportchambermusic.org) or call 978-701-4914.

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*Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR’s ARTery. Follow [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith); email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com)*

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