

# Longtime Director Of Rockport Chamber Music Festival Says Goodbye

June 01, 2017 By [Keith Powers](#) 



It really all started with the smell of turpentine.

David Deveau, artistic director of the [Rockport Chamber Music Festival](#), which opens Friday evening at the Shalin Liu Performance Center, retires from that role this summer after 22 incredibly successful seasons. Much of that — Deveau's success, the performance center itself, even an opening night appearance by Joshua Bell — has to do with the turpentine.

When Deveau took over the festival in 1995, RCMF performed in the Rockport Art Association, setting up stage in an 1800s barn that serves as the RAA's back gallery. The green room was a storage closet for paint supplies. Thus the smell of turpentine.

As you can imagine, trying to convince Peter Serkin, Charles Rosen or Dubravka Tomšič to play at the festival — which Deveau managed to do — would have been easier without the fumes.

So the glittering Shalin Liu Performance Center was dreamed up, financed and finally built -- in large part, because of Deveau.



The exterior of the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport. (Courtesy Robert Benson)

Founded in 1983, RCMF was a modest, month-long affair. Visiting ensembles would come for the weekend, stay in town with families, and play concerts. RCMF built a loyal audience among the locals, and those that ventured to the North Shore, in part because of the homey atmosphere at the Art Association.

The venue had problems — hot in the summer, impossible in the winter, room for only a postage stamp-sized stage, and hardly any creature comforts. But there was the audience, which kept coming and coming, at first as much for the homemade desserts as for the music.

Deveau, a distinguished pianist and long-time professor at MIT, brought that music to a new level. He not only engaged longtime colleagues like clarinetist Richard Stoltzman and violinist Andrés Cárdenes, but, using his contacts from



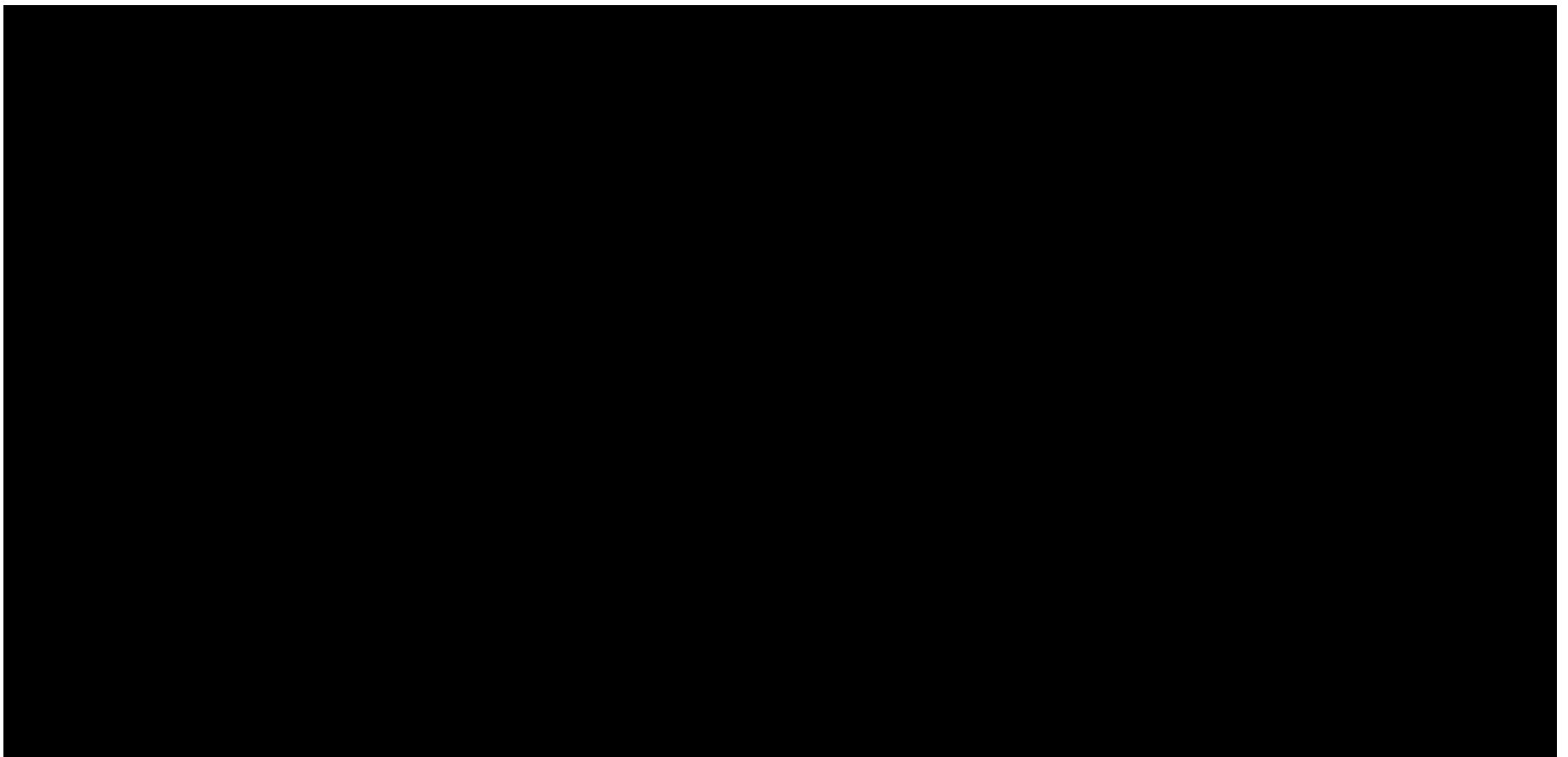
years of performing, convinced the likes of Serkin, Tomšič, Rosen, John Browning and Garrick Ohlsson to come as well.

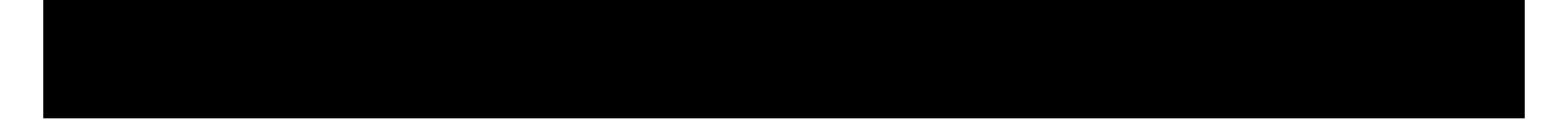
As the level of musicianship rose, Deveau and a few of the more entrepreneurial board members started plotting for a new home. But downtown Rockport is small, and real estate opportunities relatively limited for a venture of this magnitude.

Leaving town was out of the question. “It had to stay in Rockport,” Deveau said. “We talked about buying land in Gloucester, and making it the Cape Ann Music Festival. But enough people said we had to stay in Rockport, and keep the name, or they would pull their support. I’m glad we listened to them.”

That was about 10 years ago, and it took lots of luck, and lots of patience — especially enduring and finally settling a million-dollar lawsuit. “Everyone said that it was just the cost of doing business,” Deveau says. In the end it cost \$20 million.

The performance center opened in 2010, and transformed the festival into a year-round venue for music of all kinds.





“It was a miracle,” Deveau says of the effort, “but really there were two miracles. The first that the festival actually started, and kept on rolling. The second is this building.”

With 330 seats, the Shalin Liu Performance Center rises above Main Street in Rockport, its full-length glass window at the back of the stage overlooking Front Beach and open ocean. Now, along with RCMF, which has grown to six weeks of concerts, a summer jazz festival takes place in August, and music of all kinds dots the year-round schedule. Live-streaming opera, theater and ballet are also programming staples.

Rockport Music’s educational outreach has also transformed local schools — “I can’t take any credit for that,” Deveau says — and now, instead of “cajoling” artists to come to town, as he puts it, Deveau has built a festival that rivals any in the country for consistent artistic quality.



The inside of the Shalin Liu Performance Center. (Courtesy Robert Benson)

He's isn't stepping down without some hesitation. "It was an unbelievably emotional moment, with silence and then tears, when I announced it to the board," he says.

"But I remember hearing Esa-Pekka Salonen a few years ago, when he retired from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He said he wanted to spend more time composing, but he also said that he wanted to go out on top. He had achieved what he wanted to achieve. I filed that thought away at the time."

"I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to get any hints, that it may be time," he says, "to go out before my shelf life had expired."

RCMF has hired Barry Shiffman to replace Deveau. Fittingly, they will perform together in the season-closing concert on July 9. Shiffman, violinist with the St.



Lawrence String Quartet for many years, the longtime executive director of the Banff Centre string quartet competitions in Canada and dean at the Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, will certainly bring changes.

But he has a lot to work with. A world-class venue that artists are happy to play in. A linchpin festival that anchors a year-round performance schedule, and seven years of testing to see if the whole idea works in an out-of-the way summer community. Shiffman will bring changes, but he should find a welcome reception.

“The best thing he’ll have is the audience,” Deveau says. “There is genuine enthusiasm for the music here. You can feel it. He might do some of the things I wish I could have done — bring in artists-in-residence, create thematic concerts, maybe a chamber music competition.

“But for me, I’ve spent 22 years of my life providing music for audiences, most of which I have not been making myself. That’s the downside. This job cuts into your practice time and study. Before I’m below ground, there’s certain repertoire that I’d like to get down. I’ve done two or three recordings in the past couple years, and that process has gotten into my heart. I’ll have less money, but more time.”

“It’s not a retirement, it’s a rewiring,” Deveau says. “I’m sure there will be days when I realize I didn’t have to make that choice. But I’m secure with my decision. Plus it will be a shot in the arm for the organization.”

“You can only do what your heart tells you to do, and my heart said it was time.”

The Rockport Chamber Music Festival runs June 2 through July 9 in the Shalin Liu Performance Center. Joshua Bell performs on opening night, and festival highlights include performances by the Jupiter, Jasper, Brentano, and Escher quartets, pianists Garrick Ohlsson and Russell Sherman, the Lorelei and Chameleon Arts ensembles, Handel & Haydn Society, Boston Camerata, Boston Symphony Chamber Players, and multiple performances by the outgoing Deveau. There are also world premiere compositions from David Alpher and Charles Shadle.

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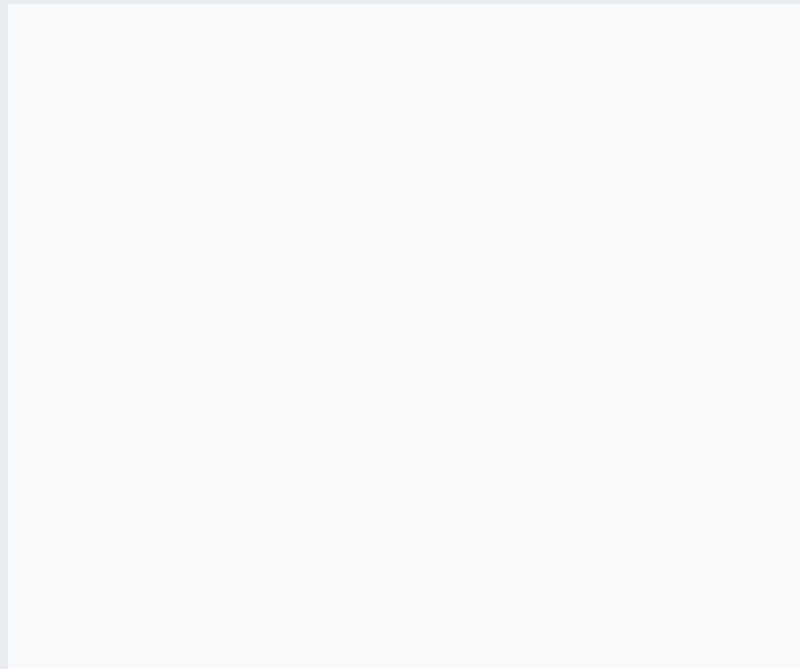
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