

DEAL MUSIC & ARTS

Festival Review 2026

3 to 12 July 2026



www.dealmusicandarts.com

A word from our Artistic Director Luke Styles

The 2026 Deal Festival was our most successful yet, delivering 39 events over ten days across 16 venues, to an audience of 3,515. We achieved the highest number of sold-out events in the festival's history, record ticket sales, and box office income that exceeded our financial target by 20%. New music featured in every concert, and diversity was championed across the whole programme, with Nneka Cummins and Michael Berkeley as our two composers in focus. The undoubted highlight of the festival was Isata Kanneh-Mason's performance with her brother, violinist Braimah Kanneh-Mason, at St George's Church – a concert of real starriness that captured the imagination of the whole town. The Sacconi Quartet's concert with clarinettist Timothy Orpen, pairing new commissions with works by Haydn, Purcell and Mozart, was another particular highlight. But if there was one thing that defined the festival's success, it was the integration and balance of such a wide variety of events across the ten days: rather than each concert or talk speaking only to its own audience, the programme as a whole reached and engaged a broad cross-section of the public.

Our Artist in Association partnership with the Royal Academy of Music entered its third year, and we introduced a legacy strand bringing our 2025 artist, cellist Hoda Jahanpour, back for a sold-out concert – a model we are keen to build on. We also launched a breakthrough political talks strand hosted by Gavin Esler, featuring Neil Kinnock, Penny Mordaunt and Jeremy Hunt, which drew strong audiences and significant local interest.

Community and family engagement remained at the heart of the festival. The opening weekend brought a Town Takeover, a Paint Out art trail with South East Artists, and a day of music, storytelling, dance and poetry in the Captain's Garden, while our closing Festival Day at the Astor Theatre brought together children's activities, the Deal Music and Arts Community Band, work with the Irene Taylor Trust, and a Young Person's Showcase featuring young musicians mentored by our 2026 Young Artist in Association, Xiaowen Shang. Free events and activity across public and community spaces meant the festival reached well beyond its ticketed venues.

What we have learnt from Festival 2026?

The success of the Artist in Association legacy strand confirmed that inviting a previous year's artist back builds audience loyalty and deepens relationships with emerging talent; we plan to repeat this model in 2027 with 2026 associate artist Xiaowen Shang.

Recording our highest-ever number of sold-out events and exceeding box office target by 20% shows that our programming – pairing world-class artists with well-known repertoire and a strong new music strand – is resonating with a growing and increasingly confident audience.

The strength of audience response to the political talks series demonstrated real appetite in Deal for high-profile speaker events, and we are already planning to repeat this strand for 2027, alongside a new 'Get Closer' series with Tom Service.

Festival overview

The 2026 Deal Festival brought ten days of world-class music, theatre, talks, writing, walks and family events to Deal, Dover and Sandwich. The programme combined internationally known performers with emerging artists, local musicians and opportunities for the community to take part.



Classical music remained central to the Festival. Pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason appeared together with her brother, the violinist Braimah Kanneh-Mason at St George's Church, while Wild Arts returned to St Mary's Arts Centre in Sandwich with Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. The programme also included the Sacconi Quartet with clarinettist Timothy Orpen, Recordare, the Betteshanger Colliery Welfare Band and a lunchtime series featuring young soloists and ensembles. Works by Composers in Focus Nneka Cummins and Michael Berkeley appeared across several concerts, alongside music by Deal Music and Arts' Artistic Director Luke Styles.

The wider programme ranged from the Gary Crosby Quintet's celebration of Miles Davis and the folk music of Gigspanner Big Band to Changeling Theatre's *Much Ado About Nothing* at Dover Castle. Broadcaster Gavin Esler hosted conversations with Dame Penny Mordaunt, Sir Jeremy Hunt and Lord Kinnock. Other events explored local history, architecture, creative writing, sound art and photography.

Community participation ran through the Festival. The opening weekend included a Town Takeover, a Paint Out art trail with South East Artists and a day of music, storytelling, dance and poetry in the Captain's Garden. The closing Festival Day at the Astor Theatre brought together children's activities, the Deal Music and Arts Community Band, work with the Irene Taylor Trust and a Young Person's Showcase.

Free events and activity in public and community spaces helped the Festival reach beyond its concert venues. Young artists had a prominent place in the programme. Pianist Xiaowen Shang, the 2026 Young Artist in Association in partnership with the Royal Academy of Music, performed a lunchtime recital, devised Charles Dickens' *Women* with actor Elizabeth Huskisson and worked with young musicians for the closing showcase. The Festival also welcomed emerging performers in classical music, jazz and other art forms, connecting its annual programme with Deal Music and Arts' year-round work.



Facts and figures

Festival days	10
Events	39
Free events	6
Attendances	3,515
Venues	16
Professional musicians and performers engaged	120
Participants from the local community as performers or in workshops	301
Local community organisations worked with (excluding venue partners)	17
Our volunteers (excluding all those arranged by the venues)	26

Some quotes from our audience

"The opportunity to hear a superb rendering by world-class musicians of my favourite musical work, Mozart's Clarinet Quintet"	"High quality musicians, varied and interesting programme, local community events for everyone to enjoy. Joyous atmosphere throughout!"
"Eclectic with something for everyone in convenient and appropriate venues. Prices affordable too!"	"Plenty of variety....high quality, excellent community engagement, and great to see so many sold out events"

Thank you to all the funders and supporters who come together to make the Deal Festival possible. Without them, none of this would happen.



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