

# In the Beginning

It was 10 days long. There were about 8 faculty artists and 24 students. In June 1984, the Colorado College Conservatory and Summer Music Festival convened its first session.

“I see it (the festival) as a continuation of a cultural tradition on campus of bringing live experiences to the people at each moment in time,” explained Libby Rittenberg, a retired CC economics professor who, as dean of the college’s summer sessions, oversaw the festival from 2003 through 2008. “It amazes me to think that, a hundred years ago, people didn’t have the time or the energy to put into this ‘frivolous stuff.’ But that wasn’t the case. We have always done it as a community.”

Summertime music first appeared on campus in a significant way in August 1896 with the two-day, second annual State Music Festival. A golden age commenced in 1938 with appearances by musical luminaries such as Roger Sessions, Nicholas Slonimsky, Roy and Johana Harris, Olin Downs, Josef Gingold, Paul Hindemith, Virgil Thomson, Sidney Harth, Paul Doktor, and Max Lanner.

“I was a [Colorado College] student, starting in 1959,” recalled Michael Grace, who is a co-founder of the present-day festival. “And in the summers that I stayed here, I went to all those concerts. The driving force behind them was Max Lanner, who was the chair of the music department. He had good friends in the field, because he used to play a lot, with string players mostly.”

What was then called the Summer Concert Series continued into the 1960s but gradually wound down, leaving the nationally renowned summertime dance program led by Hanya Holm as the only marquee summertime arts offering on campus. In 1983, after 43 years, it, too, came to an end. Clearly, the college needed another program that would generate buzz while honoring the institution's cultural heritage.

“Rick Bradley, who was dean of the college at that time, was a physicist who was also a musician and a composer. He was committed to the idea of bringing summer music back on campus as was (Elmer) Pete Peterson from the French department, who was then dean of the summer session,” recalled CC political-science professor Tim Fuller. “They realized everything doesn't exist forever so the question was how to make the transition into a new era more than anything else.” Peterson sought out Michael Grace, then a professor in the music department.

“He said to me, ‘Mike, I think I’d like to have a summer concert series here,’” said Grace. “‘We ought to be doing something.’ So, we got in touch with the conductor and music director of the Fort Worth Symphony and Chamber Orchestra, John Giordano.”

Giordano’s Colorado Springs connection came via an unlikely source: the Fort Worth-based Dorothy Shaw Bell Choir. For decades, the choir had been migrating north for the summer music season, and Giordano had conducted a number of the choir’s programs

in Colorado Springs. “He (Giordano) was the one who said, ‘Hey, look. Let’s put something on. We can have an orchestra. We can really do some good thing,’” said Grace. “So that’s how it started, and he was the music director. He had some very good contacts he wanted to bring on. One was a violinist named Robert Davidovich, then at North Texas State. He was a hot violinist, very good. But perhaps the biggest star was a pianist named Steven De Groote, who had won the Van Cliburn Competition (1977) and was very well-known in Fort Worth. He also knew a violinist in London, the leader of the English Chamber Orchestra, José Luis Garcia, who got involved as well. These were our headliners, and they were terrific people, terrific musicians.”

Giordano, who was the first orchestral conductor for the festival, also brought in principals from his chamber orchestra in Fort Worth to fill faculty positions. Through his connections, he also was able to have some notable violinists join in the music-making: David Zafer and Jerry Rubinstein, concertmaster of the National Symphony of Brussels.

Giordano recalled the culture they tried to create, the essence of which became the tone of the festival over the decades. “We tried to put faculty and students together to produce a relaxed experience. We let go of those who did not behave very well, who were arrogant. We just didn’t invite them back. It was a very warm, friendly atmosphere.”

Michael Grace was the administrator of the festival. Three or four years later, he became dean of the summer session and had to give up his festival role. His wife, Susan Grace, was already a faculty pianist for the festival, and Michael knew what he had to do. “I got Sue to take it over, and that’s when it began to really take off.” Susan Grace became artistic director and later music director after Giordano left the festival after the 1997 session.