

Robert W. Cole
March 15, 1931-July 11, 2026

Renowned performing arts impresario Robert W. Cole, who transformed the UC Berkeley-based presenting organization, Cal Performances, into one of the most distinguished performance centers in the world from 1986-2009, died on Saturday, July 11, 2026 from complications following a stroke. Cole was 95.

Under Cole's visionary leadership, Cal Performances became *the* place to hear and see world class music, opera, dance, and theatre. For 23 years he scoured the globe to find virtuosic and cutting-edge artists, bring them to Berkeley, and uplift West Coast audiences. A conductor and musician by training, Cole brought a performer's instinct and an institution-builder's imagination to every initiative he undertook. In doing so, he shaped not only what happened on Cal Performances stages, but also profoundly influenced the national arts scene.

ABOUT

Robert Cole was born on March 15, 1931, in San Jose, California. His father died in an automobile accident before he was born—a tragedy that cast a shadow over his entire life. His father's only keepsake was a quarter-size violin—a student-level instrument which became an important springboard for his multifaceted decades-long performing arts career.

Mr. Cole played clarinet and saxophone in middle school. In high school, he proudly played saxophone six nights a week at the Hawaiian Gardens nightclub in San Jose, successfully disguising his age with a pair of lens-less eyeglasses.

1950s and 60s

Mr. Cole graduated from San Jose State University with a degree in music and then spent four years in the U.S. Air Force directing marching bands. A ranking sergeant, he was posted to the Northeast Air Command headquarters in St. John's, Newfoundland. In addition to conducting the air force band and orchestra, he also conducted live music for Canadian Broadcasting Company radio plays and other programs. In 1956, he enrolled in graduate school at USC as a musicology major. Allured by the institution's resident composers Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, as well as distinguished conducting professors Richard Lert and Ingolf Dahl, Mr. Cole took every music course that was offered, but said he soon realized that "he was leaning towards being a performer rather than sitting in a library the rest of his life." He later studied conducting with Leonard Bernstein and Leon Barzin at Tanglewood and with Hans Swarowsky in Europe.

While at USC, Mr. Cole taught high school in Tulare, where he also founded the Tulare County Symphony, a community-based orchestra, and served as its conductor from 1960 to 1973. The 66-year-long success of the Tulare County Symphony, now the Sequoia Symphony Orchestra, is a testament to Cole's foundational efforts. In 1963, he joined the music faculty at North Hollywood High School. Serendipitously, one of his most gifted students was high school senior Michael Tilson Thomas, (former music director of the San Francisco Symphony), who would become a lifelong friend and professional colleague for the next 70 years.

1970s

Mr. Cole's early professional career was a whirlwind of activity. Married with two children in Los Angeles, he led four different orchestras while finishing his studies at USC. He also began working with Ballet Society of Los Angeles founded by David Lichine and Tania Riabouchinska, stars of the original Ballets Russes. He served as both conductor and executive director of their company, generously supported by Paul Newman and his wife Joanne Woodward.

With Michael Tilson Thomas, Mr. Cole also founded the North Hollywood Chamber Orchestra, where Mr. Thomas served as associate director under Mr. Cole; Mr. Thomas credited Robert Cole with giving him his first conducting gig—the *Siegfried Idyll* of Wagner.

Not long afterward, in 1971, Michael Tilson Thomas was appointed music director of the Buffalo (NY) Philharmonic. In an unforeseen reversal of roles, Thomas later invited Mr. Cole to serve as associate conductor of that orchestra. Mr. Cole remained with the Buffalo Philharmonic from 1973 to 1977.

It was in Buffalo that the lure of performing arts presenting emerged, when Mr. Cole was asked by community members to help re-open Shea's Buffalo Theater, a touring venue for diverse performances.

1980s

His success in restoring Shea's Buffalo Theater came to the attention of the Bardavon 1869 Opera House in Poughkeepsie (NY), the state's oldest opera house and one that was in need of restoration and reopening. From 1979 to 1983, Mr. Cole brought a full range of performing arts to the Bardavon—opera, dance, musical theater, children's theater, chamber music and more. He spent four years there and then the next three running the performing arts program at Brooklyn College.

1986 on

Mr. Cole became the director of Cal Performances in 1986 and served in this capacity for 23 years. While he based his many years of success on the operational philosophy "... *if you have the right lineup you can sell tickets*," Mr. Cole was, at heart, a risk-taker. To many, hiring avant-garde artists seemed risky at first, but it was Cole's unwavering ability to recognize extraordinary artistry that was key to Cal Performances' success for over two decades. Combined with an educated and sophisticated understanding of what makes a work of art truly great, his eye for talent propelled the organization to the top ranks of performing arts institutions, regularly mounting world, American, and West Coast premieres in dance, music, opera, and theater.

Early on Cole began forging the long-term artist partnerships that would define Cal Performances' identity for generations. One of the most celebrated was with choreographer Mark Morris, whom Cole first invited to Berkeley in 1987, and who has premiered a substantial body of work at Zellerbach Hall including the world premieres of *World Power* (1995), *Falling Down Stairs* (1997), and *Rhymes With Silver* (1997)—as well as the US premieres of Morris's staging of Jean-Philippe Rameau's *Platée* (1998) and *King Arthur* (2006), and the West Coast premieres

of *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (1994), *The Hard Nut* (1996), and *Mozart Dances* (2007).

Cole commissioned new works from an impressive range of artists, including theater and opera director Peter Sellars, choreographers Twyla Tharp, Bill T. Jones, Merce Cunningham, and Pascal Rioult; the Kronos Quartet; actor and director Robert Lepage; and performance artist Laurie Anderson. Among the highlights of his tenure were the world premiere of John Adams' songplay *I Was Looking at the Ceiling, and Then I Saw the Sky* (1995), with a libretto by UC Berkeley poet June Jordan and directed by Peter Sellars; the US premiere of *Nur Du (Only You)* by German expressionist choreographer Pina Bausch and her Tanztheater Wuppertal (1996); the first West Coast performances of Yo-Yo Ma's Silkroad Ensemble in a 10-day festival held on the UC Berkeley campus; and the final performances of the acclaimed Berliner Ensemble before the company disbanded in 1999.

The international companies he brought to Berkeley—Lyon Opera Ballet and Orchestra, the Royal Court Theatre, the Grand Kabuki Theater of Japan, the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre of Dublin, the Bolshoi Ballet and Orchestra, and William Christie and Les Arts Florissants, to name a small selection—made Cal Performances a genuine destination for the world's most celebrated artists and companies, and attracted new audiences within the Bay Area. Among the US debuts Cole presented were tenor Ian Bostridge, violinist Julia Fischer, and the early music ensemble Il Giardino Armonico.

Under his leadership, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater came to perform in Berkeley more than anywhere else in the world outside of New York. The roster of artists who made Cal Performances a regular home included Yo-Yo Ma, the Takács Quartet, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Cecilia Bartoli, Ravi Shankar, Salif Keita, Philip Glass, Jordi Savall, Cesária Évora, Paco de Lucía, and Sweet Honey in the Rock. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma once observed that Cole was an artist himself, and that he "understands what artists need to do their best work"—an insight that explains much about why so many of the world's great performers trusted him and returned to Berkeley again and again.

In addition to Cal Performances' regular presenting season, in 1990, Mr. Cole, along with Musical Offering proprietors Joseph and Jean Spencer and the Department of Music at UC Berkeley, founded the biennial Berkeley Festival & Exhibition of Early Music. Top early music artists travelled across the globe to perform including, but not limited to, Gustav Leonhardt, Jordi Savall, Stile Antico and Vox Luminis. One of the most notable events, in 2000 and 2002, was the revival of a lavish 17th-century French equestrian ballet first produced in 1612 for King Louis XIII, *Le Carrousel du Roi*. Recreated by musicologist Kate van Orden, the historically accurate production featured elaborate dressage performed by costumed horses, ponies, riders, and acrobats accompanied by the original score.

While at Cal Performances, it was important to Mr. Cole to expand his audiences to include K-12 students. He developed such innovative programs as *SchoolTime* and *Cal Performances in the Classroom* which introduced busloads of K-12 children to the performing arts in Zellerbach Hall at little or no cost. Among the programs Cole counted among his proudest achievements was Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp, which takes place on the UC Berkeley campus and will celebrate

its 25th anniversary in 2027. The camp opened locally in 2002 as a free summer program through which young people can experience first-hand the transformative power of dance while learning essential life skills. Now well into its third decade, Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp has touched more than 1,300 young people—a legacy that reflects Cole's conviction that the arts belong to everyone, and that the work of a performing arts organization extends far beyond the concert hall.

Supporting all facets of artistic excellence, Mr. Cole teamed up with Meyer Sound to use Zellerbach Hall as a prototype for the installation of Meyer Sound's groundbreaking "Constellation" sound system in 2006. This technological innovation continues to enhance Zellerbach patrons' acoustical experiences to this day.

Robert Cole's work was recognized with diverse and distinguished awards: in 1995, France's Minister of Culture and Francophonie named Mr. Cole a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters; in 1997, UC Berkeley Chancellor Chang-Lin Tien awarded him the Berkeley Citation, the campus's highest administrative honor, given to individuals who have "rendered distinguished or extraordinary service to the University"; and in 1998, he received the William Dawson Award for Programmatic Excellence from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP).

2011

After stepping down as Director of Cal Performances, in 2011 Robert Cole was recruited to launch the Green Music Center on the campus of Sonoma State University. In 2014, he wound down his career as the Interim Artistic and Executive Director of the Napa Valley Performing Arts Center at the Lincoln Theater in Yountville, the last position he held. He also continued to conduct, notably for international tours of the Perm (Russia) Ballet and Orchestra.

Cole's closest colleague and confidant Earl F. (Budd) Cheit said it best: "In his twenty-three years as Director of Cal Performances, Robert Cole took a program lacking in artistic direction, losing money, and urgently in need of leadership, and turned it into the major performing arts presenter and commissioner on the West Coast, one of the most important dance stages in the nation and an internationally respected presence in the world of performing arts."

Robert Cole is survived by his son Alex Julian Cole, daughter-in-law Anne Cole and grandson Daniel Cole; and son Thomas Montgomery Cole, daughter-in-law Judy Cole, and grandson Charles Cole, and his wife of 24 years, Susan Muscarella.

"Robert Cole's Oral History is housed in the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. The digital version is available online at: <https://digicoll.lib.berkeley.edu/record/218853?v=pdf>"

In lieu of flowers, the family requests contributions in Robert's memory be made to Cal Performances (<https://calperformances.org/support/>) or the San Francisco Early Music Society (<https://www.sfems.org/robert-cole-memorial-fund.>)

Submitted by Susan Muscarella, July 16, 2026

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