



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: July 16, 2026 (updated July 17)



Photo of Robert Cole by Peter DeSilva is available for download from the Cal Performances [online press room](#).

Cal Performances at UC Berkeley Honors Legacy of Former Director Robert Cole

Cole, who passed away on July 11, served as Director of Cal Performances from 1986 to 2009

Berkeley, CA, July 16, 2026—Cal Performances, the performing arts presenter at UC Berkeley, honors the legacy of its former director Robert Cole, who passed away on July 11.

Robert Cole, who served as Director of Cal Performances from 1986 to 2009, was a singular force in American arts presenting—a conductor and musician by training who brought a performer's instinct and an institution-builder's vision to everything he touched. For decades, he shaped not only what happened on Cal Performances' stages, but how an entire region came to understand and experience the transformative power of live performance. His passing leaves a profound absence, and an equally profound legacy.

Cole arrived at Cal Performances in 1986, inheriting a respected regional organization that presented roughly 45 events each year on a relatively modest budget. What he built over the next 23 years was something altogether different: an internationally acclaimed presenting, producing, and commissioning organization that came to stand alongside the greatest performing arts centers and festivals in the world, and directly helped to shape the performing arts ecosystem. By the time he stepped down at the close of the 2008–09 season, Cal Performances was presenting some 130 performances annually, with a budget that had more than tripled and ticket sales that had grown more than ten-fold since he took the helm.

Numbers, of course, tell only part of a story. What Cole understood—and what made him so effective—was that true transformation in the arts happens through relationships, through artistic risk, and through an unwavering belief that audiences deserve the very best. "I had the idea to make [Berkeley] more like a London, New York, or Paris where the greatest artists come from all over the world," he said in a 2005 KQED interview. "That was my goal when I came here and that's what we've been working on ever since." He achieved it.

Building Something New

From the earliest years of his tenure, 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 been coming every year since. Over the following decades, Cole presented a remarkable series of Mark Morris Dance Group premieres and commissions, 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).

He commissioned or co-commissioned new works from an extraordinary 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, and the Bolshoi Ballet and Orchestra, 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, 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.

A Visionary for New and Early Music

Cole's impact extended even beyond Cal Performances' halls. In 1990, Cole founded the [Berkeley Festival & Exhibition](#), a biennial international festival of early music, presented in association with the UC Berkeley Department of Music, the San Francisco Early Music Society, and Early Music America. The festival helped establish Berkeley as one of the world's premier destinations for early music, and continues to draw audiences and artists from across the globe. In 2003, Cole established the Berkeley Edge Fest, a biennial showcase for new and contemporary performing arts that featured the work of John Adams, John Zorn, Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, Paul Dresher, and Frederic Rzewski, among others across its multiple years of production. Both festivals reflected a belief that the full breadth of musical tradition—from the ancient to the newly made—deserved a place on Berkeley's stages.

After his time at Cal Performances, Cole continued to lend his expertise and vision to the broader arts community, including through his contributions to the Berkeley Festival and the Green Music Center at Sonoma State University. He remained, throughout these years, a devoted supporter of Cal Performances, and his continued engagement with the organization he had built was a source of immense meaning to those who carry its work forward today.

An Educator and Institution-Builder

Cole understood that a great performing arts organization must also be a great civic institution. As arts funding declined nationally, he expanded Cal Performances' education offerings dramatically. By the time he stepped down, more than 100 programs were presented annually, including the highly regarded [SchoolTime](#) and [teaching artist in-school residency](#) initiatives, which have been nationally recognized as model arts education programs.

Cole also shaped the extracurricular music life of UC Berkeley through formal management of Student Musical Activities (SMA): the Cal Band, the UC Jazz Ensemble, and the UC Choral Ensembles. He deepened the organization's ties to the University by working closely with faculty to support their work, and by programming lectures, demonstrations, and symposia for students and community members throughout the year.

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.

Honors and a Lasting Mark

The recognition Cole received from the wider world was a fitting reflection of his accomplishments. 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.” In 1995, France's Minister of Culture and Francophonie named him a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters. In 1998, he received the William Dawson Award for Programmatic Excellence from the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP).

Cole came to Cal Performances with distinguished experience: he had studied conducting with Richard Lert and Ingolf Dahl in California, with Leonard Bernstein and Leon Barzin at the Tanglewood Music Center, and with Hans Swarowsky in Europe. He was a graduate of the University of Southern California School of Music; and had previously served as Executive Director of the Brooklyn Center for Performing Arts at Brooklyn College and of the Bardavon 1869 Opera House in Poughkeepsie, New York, as Associate Conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, and as Music Director and Executive Director of the Ballet Society of Los Angeles.

When he announced his departure in 2007, Chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau offered words that still ring true today: “Robert has not only heightened Cal Performances' profile in the arts world, but also the organization's service to the educational mission of the University. The arts and sciences stand together in the important work of advancing civilization, and in this complex world nothing bridges cultural differences more effectively than the performing arts; they demonstrate the immeasurable range of human expression and our shared humanity. The University community has been the recipient of Robert's impeccable artistic judgment, and because of it, we have all grown in our understanding and appreciation of the world.”

Cole himself, ever looking forward, reflected on what remained possible: “There is uncommon opportunity for growth at Cal Performances; what I have been able to accomplish with this talented staff and devoted Board of Trustees”—a board that he helped to initiate—“is only the beginning.”

He was right. The organization he built continues to grow and to bring the world's greatest artists to Berkeley—a living testament to the vision, dedication, and artistry of a remarkable leader. Cal Performances will always consider Robert Cole part of our family, and we are profoundly grateful for everything he gave us and to the community we share.

Robert Cole is survived by his sons, Alex Julian Cole and Thomas Montgomery Cole; his grandsons, Charles Cole and Daniel Cole; and his wife, Susan Muscarella. Cal Performances extends its deepest condolences to them, as well as all other members of his family, his friends, and the many people whose lives were touched by his extraordinary work.

Robert Cole's full obituary is available from [Cal Performances online press room](#) (PDF).

MEDIA CONTACT:

Louisa Spier

Cal Performances

(510) 643-6714

lspier@calperformances.org