SOUTHEASTERN PIANO FESTIVAL:
A decade of excellence

The first Southeastern Piano Festival in the summer of 2003 was a fairly understated event. The week-long program at the University of South Carolina School of Music attracted young pianists mostly from the Southeast, school faculty took on many tasks and festival presented only one guest artist recital. Faculty, staff, students and friends pitched in to provide food, transportation, funding and lots of hospitality. Everyone is still pitching in, but now entering its 10th year the Southeastern Piano Festival has grown into a must-attend event for music fans. The only festival of its kind in the region, it presents a week of concerts by some of the most talented and innovative pianists in the world and attracts students from coast to coast.

To celebrate its anniversary the 2012 festival opens June 10 at the Koger Center for the Arts with a “Piano Extravaganza” concert featuring more than a dozen pianists among them USC piano faculty and many winners of the Southeastern Piano Festival Arthur Fraser International Concerto Competition.

“The festival has been a success on so many levels and we’re thrilled to be celebrating our first decade,” said Marina Lomazov, festival founder and artistic director. “The festival continues to provide top-flight training for young musicians, but has also grown to be one of the most significant showcases of piano music.”

The Southeastern Piano Festival is a perfect example of the cultural richness the university provides to the community, according to University President Harris Pastides: “The 10th Festival promises to be one of the most exciting music events of the year. USC is proud to host this wonderful week which brings attention to our School of Music and to the University’s commitment to the arts.”

The festival has developed into an important part of the USC School of Music mission, according to Dean Tayloe Harding.

“For me the number one issue is what the festival manifests and actualizes for us,” he said. “It represents an aspect of our mission in a profound and very pure way – it is an example of the premium our faculty, staff and students place on excellence and the pursuit of the very best.”

Dr. Lomazov was asked to create a festival by then-School of Music Dean Jamal Rossi shortly after she came to the university in 2002. She and her husband Joseph Rackers, also a piano faculty member at USC, studied many festivals and picked the best aspects to create the Southeastern Piano Festival.

“She had a clear vision of what she had in mind – all I had to do was support her,” said Rossi, Executive Associate Dean of the Eastman School of Music. “From the first year there was a great buzz about it. It is one of the great success stories at the university.” The USC piano
faculty also embraced the idea and since inception, Charles Fugo, Scott Price, Joseph Rackers, and Professor Emeritus John Kenneth Adams formed a significant core of the festival and essential part of its growth.

Among the guest artists have been veteran performers and dynamic younger musicians. The world-renowned roster of pianists who have performed at the festival is impressive: Olga Kern, John Nakamatsu, Yakov Kasman, Ann Shein, Jerome Lowenthal, Ursula Oppens, the Anderson-Roe Duo, Valery Kuleshov, Chu-Fang Huang and Oxana Yablonskaya. The concerts mix traditional classical fare by well-known composers with innovative programming such as a legendary recital by Christopher Taylor in 2009 that juxtaposed Frederic Rzewski’s “The People United Will Never Be Defeated” variations with Bach’s “Goldberg Variations.” From the start many of the concerts were standing room only and in 2011 all guest artist concerts were sold out.

The festival has also offered other programs such as commissioning a new piano work written specifically for the Arthur Fraser Competition, outreach concerts in local venues and mounting a display of historically-important pianos including those used extensively by Vladimir Horowitz and Van Cliburn.

The festival has received support from many organizations, businesses and individuals including Rice Music House, Steinway & Sons, the Symphony League of the South Carolina Philharmonic, the School of Music, the South Carolina Philharmonic and the Conductors Institute of South Carolina. A Friends of the Festival was established in 2011. The festival is funded almost entirely through private support.

While the concert series has become a must-see-and-hear for music fans, training students is still a core festival mission. One of the most important aspects is the Arthur Fraser International Concerto Competition. The festival partners with the Symphony League of the South Carolina Philharmonic to mount the competition which is named in honor of the first conductor of the orchestra and chairman of what was then the USC Department of Music. Winners receive cash awards and the opportunity to perform with the South Carolina Philharmonic. Many have been invited back to perform solo concerts during the festival. The competition is an all-day event which is open to the public and winners give the festival’s closing concert the following evening.

Since its inception the Southeastern Piano Festival has trained nearly 200 musicians in the 8th through 12th grades. In the early years, the students came from seven to eight states; in 2011 they hailed from 17 states. In the highly-competitive selection process only 20 students are accepted. Many have gone on study at major colleges, universities and conservatories, win top prizes at competitions around the world and start professional careers.

“The festival does a good job of identifying the best students who have applied and they are totally transformed after this week,” Harding said. “All of these great things happen because of those 20 students. I don’t think this could be replicated in any other way.”