

HISTORY MAKER

VITTORIO GIANNINI

Born: Oct. 19, 1903, Philadelphia, Penn.
Died: Nov. 28, 1966, Winston-Salem
Known as: The first president of the UNC

School of the Arts and an accomplished operatic and orchestral composer

Vittorio Giannini was surrounded by music, music business and technology from infancy. He had the advantage of superlative musical education from masters in New York, Milan, Philadelphia and Chicago, eventually joining their ranks.

His parents and two elder sisters were successful performers on operatic and symphony stages.

Described by the Charlotte Observer as “a small man with thick white hair and bright brown eyes” who “lives in a glow of enthusiasm,” he wanted to make such opportunities available to talented youth in other regions, as well.

His parents, operatic tenor Ferruccio Giannini and virtuosa violinist Antonietta Briglia, established the Verdi Opera House in Philadelphia. Ferruccio was one of the first singers to be recorded for Emil Berliner’s Gramophone in 1896.

Antonietta began teaching Vittorio violin when he was 3, and the boy won a coveted scholarship to the storied

Verdi Conservatory in Milan at age 10.

He graduated from the Juilliard School of Music in New York City and later the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. He would eventually teach at each of these schools as well while maintaining a successful career as a composer of operas, choral music and symphonies.

In the early 1960s, he found an ally to create the school he dreamed of. North Carolina’s Gov. Terry Sanford, together with John Ehle and others, gathered support and convinced the General Assembly to establish the nation’s first state-funded school for the arts.

He fought to provide a school with “a great deal of flexibility” so students had a “climate in which to flourish.”

In 1963, \$325,000 was designated by the state “to create ... a training center for instruction in the performing arts.”

Raleigh, Charlotte and other Tarheel cities campaigned to host the school, but Winston-Salem edged them out with a ready



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facility (James A. Gray High School) and a strong show of monetary support from the community. Nearly \$1 million was pledged in just two days.

“It is very important that the community appreciate the importance of the arts in civilized life,” he said in 1963, “and the community must have faith in our youth.”

The North Carolina School of the Arts opened in 1965 and became part of the

UNC school system in 1971, a step he didn’t live to see. However, he was credited by Allen B. Lambdin, manager of the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, with planting the seed.

“The bold idea to establish a center that would serve the Southeast, the nation and perhaps the world was put into a clear outline by Giannini.”

- Kate Rauhauser-Smith