

Member Band Spotlight

A Quarter-Century of Harmony:

CELEBRATING
25
YEARS
OF THE



Highlands Ranch Concert Band

~ Cindy Emmons, President, Highlands Ranch Concert Band

On May 3, 2026, the stage at Rock Canyon High School in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, was alive with the vibrant energy of a true community milestone. Eighty-five musicians sat poised with their instruments, a commissioned score rested on the conductor's podium, and an audience filled with generations of local supporters waited in anticipation. This grand setting framed the Highlands Ranch Concert Band's (HRCB) 25th Anniversary Concert – a landmark event titled “Encore! Celebrating 25 Years of Music and Memories.”

The afternoon was a living retrospective, welcoming seven of the eight past and current conductors to share the podium. The HRCB celebrated a rich history of providing free, high-quality music to the South Metro Denver area. For 25 years, HRCB has offered a welcoming musical home to over a hundred local instrumentalists. The milestone concert provided the perfect opportunity for the band to reflect on its humble beginnings, celebrate current achievements, and look forward to a bright, harmonious future.

FROM A SUMMER DREAM TO A YEAR-ROUND LEGACY

To understand the HRCB's 25-year journey, one must look back to the early days of the community. Founded in 1981, Highlands Ranch spent its first two decades focused on building homes, establishing

schools, and creating the infrastructure of a thriving residential hub. Within, a grassroots cultural movement was quietly brewing.

In early 2001, Carolyn Blinsmon, a local resident and passionate musician, wanted to play in a community concert band. Discovering that none existed, she decided to build one from the ground up, quickly setting a series of foundational events into motion. Carolyn secured initial funding through a Highlands Ranch Metro District grant and recruited Mark Wurst, band director at Highlands Ranch High School, as the band's first conductor. She established the organization as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and publicized the first organizational meeting. On April 3, 2001, local musicians gathered with a shared vision. Officers were elected, weekly rehearsals set, and the name “Highlands Ranch Concert Band” was officially selected. The 32 charter members wasted no time. The band held its very first rehearsal on May 30, and debuted its first public performance on June 20 at Redstone Park.

Originally intended as a summer group only, the band changed course after the final rehearsal of that inaugural 2001 summer season. As Car-

Top of Page: Members of the Highlands Ranch Concert Band performing during the band's 25th Anniversary concert.

All photos by Rudy Duran

Highlands Ranch Concert Band ...



HCRC Founding Members: (left-right) Tamara Verkler, Kirsten Forbes, Bruce Fox, Carolyn Blinsmon, Kent Blanchard, Leslie Dixon, Mark Wurst

oklyn made closing announcements, a member yelled out: "Keep playing! Let's keep playing year-round!" A spontaneous vote was called, and the membership overwhelmingly agreed to extend operations into a year-round schedule. That enthusiastic moment transformed the organization into the permanent community concert band it is today.

THE MUSICIANS BEHIND THE NOTES

The heartbeat of the HRCB has always been its members. Operating under a non-audition policy with no caps on section sizes, the band welcomes all performers. This inclusive philosophy has created a multigenerational membership, spanning from high school students to 85-year-old veterans.

Members come from diverse professional backgrounds - including aviation, science, healthcare, business, law, engineering, education, and the arts - working as pilots, veterinarians, teachers, accountants, attorneys, and active or retired band directors. What unites these individuals is not their resumes, but a shared love of instrumental music and a commitment to their community.

This deep sense of fellowship was felt in 2024. To honor the memory of Michelle Walker - a beloved, long-serving board member who passed away unexpectedly - the band commissioned composer Davide A. Pedrazzini to write an original piece titled "Dance of Emotions."

The work served as an enduring tribute to her years of quiet dedication. With Michelle's husband and daughter still performing in the ensemble today, the piece stands as a poignant reminder that the HRCB is more than just a musical group; it is a family bound together by music. After 25 years, the founding mission remains intact: to provide a welcoming space where local musicians can call the HRCB home and find a bright spot in their weekly routines.

A LEGACY OF MUSICAL LEADERSHIP

The artistic growth of the HRCB directly reflects the talented educators and conductors who have stepped onto its podium. Following the foundational leadership of Mark Wurst in 2001, a rotation of exceptional directors guided the expanding group. This lineup included Neil Guy, Director of Bands at Cherokee Trail High School; Bruce Fox, former Instrumental Music Director at Newton Middle School; and Steve Asheim, retired band director from Heritage High School. Each educator lent their unique expertise, deep musical intuition, and collaborative spirit to elevate rehearsals and public performances.



Conductor Mark McClurken, leading the band performing "The Symphonic Beatles" and getting the audience to join the band in feeling the groove.

In 2004, Joe Brice, retired band director from Smoky Hill High School, joined the conducting staff. He brought an infectious enthusiasm and a commitment to making music accessible and meaningful for all. He became the longest-serving conductor in the band's history, leading for



The Highlands Ranch Concert Band, under the direction of past and current conductors, at their anniversary concert on May 3, 2026, performing "Encore! Celebrating 25 years of Music & Memories."

an incredible 20 years before becoming Conductor Emeritus in 2024. The modern era of HRCB has been shaped by additional veteran educators. Dr. Greg Fant, former Associate Director of Bands at New Mexico State University, became principal conductor in 2024. Though he initially joined as a saxophonist, his leadership was quickly recognized. He became an integral part of the conducting staff, maintaining the group's high artistic standards. Fant is joined by two associate conductors: Rob Yost, a horn player who spent over three decades directing instrumental music in Colorado public schools, and Mark McClurken, a retired music director who transitioned from a performing instrumentalist to associate conductor. The band also regularly features guest conductors drawn from its own players.



HRCB Board Members: (left-right) Cindy Emmons, Beth Ambaruch, Kathy Benson, Greg Walker, Victoria Thalimer, Terri Mercer, Joel Klein.

CONCERTS THAT HONOR AND CELEBRATE

Over its 25-year history, the HRCB has presented over 120 free public concerts. Playing four to five major events annually, the band designs diverse programming – traditional wind literature, symphonic pops, contemporary movie scores, and Broadway classics – to ensure the music remains accessible and engaging for all.

The Highlands Ranch Concert Band has enriched the community through a variety of musical traditions and special events. For 20 consecutive years, the band hosted an annual regional music festival for Denver area community bands to share their love of music. Concerts often feature civic and historical themes, including annual tributes honoring military veterans and performances celebrating Colorado's 150th statehood anniversary in 2026. The band is also a favorite at the community Ice Cream Social and will present the family-friendly Halloween concert "Music for a Darkened Theatre" in October 2026.

The band mentors the next generation of performers by consistently inviting elementary school choirs and middle school bands to share the stage during holiday and Veterans Day concerts, showing the young students that music can be a lifelong endeavor.

THE MILESTONE EVENT: ENCORE!

The culmination of this 25-year legacy was realized on May 3, 2026, at the "Encore! Celebrating 25 Years of Music and Memories" anniversary concert. The event brought the band's history full circle as seven past and current conductors returned to lead the ensemble. For the conductors who remembered the early days of standing before 35 players, looking out at a robust 85-piece symphonic band was a visual testament to the organization's incredible growth.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE NEXT MOVEMENT

Moving into its next quarter-century, the HRCB remains as energized as ever. With a firm commitment to reaching new audiences, welcoming incoming musicians, honoring its leadership legacy, and delivering premier cultural experiences, the HRCB proudly continues its mission as the musical heart of Highlands Ranch.



Cindy Emmons has been a member of the Highlands Ranch Concert Band for 12 years and currently serves as President. A flutist in the band, she is passionate about fostering opportunities for musicians to continue performing throughout their lives. Cindy holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music and a Master of Arts in Education from California State University, Long Beach. She teaches 3rd grade in Highlands Ranch Colorado and shares the love of music with her students. Music runs deep in her family – her husband is a high school band director, and her oldest daughter is a middle school band director.



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