



Sweet sounds

ROYAL CONSERVATORY OF
MUSIC'S PETER SIMON ON
WHAT WAS, AND WHAT CAN BE,
IN THE STUDY OF MUSIC.

Photography courtesy of **The Royal Conservatory**

Peter Simon

For the past 28 years, I have had the great privilege of being president and CEO of the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM), a nonprofit institution that has shaped the nature of Canadian society over the course of its 134-year history. While the RCM functions like other conservatories in the training of future performing artists and educators, it is also a world leader in the development of structured systems and programs for the study of music used by hundreds of thousands of people annually across North America.

Music has a unique power to connect people at the deepest and most profound level and is therefore of vital importance in creating and building a cohesive society and culture. Ultimately, it is culture that truly determines the success and greatness of a nation. Past participants of our certificate program in Canada number in the millions, and their shared experience of creating and

expressing their feelings through music fosters a deep bond in our nation.

Of course, the vast majority of participants do not choose a career in music, but their experience leads to a lifelong support of arts organizations and a foundational level of musical literacy and appreciation. Alumni of the certificate program include prime ministers, doctors, electricians, athletes, actors, contractors, lawyers, plumbers, shopkeepers, and people in virtually every other profession.

As you can imagine, there are also a fair number of musicians, and here, too, the list includes a very broad number of genres. Some recognizable people include two of the greatest pianists of the 20th century, Glenn Gould and Oscar Peterson; jazz and pop musicians Diana Krall, Sarah McLachlan, Burton Cummings, Gordon Lightfoot, and Paul Shaffer; record producers David Foster



Lang Lang receives his Honorary Fellowship from Simon

and Bob Ezrin (producer of Pink Floyd's iconic album *The Wall*); legendary opera stars Jon Vickers and Teresa Stratas; and classical artists like conductor Sir Roger Norrington and pianist Angela Hewitt. Our graduates also populate the great orchestras and chamber ensembles of the world.

I believe the study of music is the most powerful means through which young people can develop their full potential. It awakens and stimulates the three greatest attributes of humankind—emotion, curiosity, and imagination—all the while opening the door to a sublime realm of beauty and a higher purpose for humanity. The study of music is also a proven path for young people to attain higher levels of cognitive development, creativity, and academic achievement.

My views are well supported by scientific evidence that demonstrates the effect of music study on the development of neural networks in the brains of young children. The RCM has initiated a number of projects in public schools across Canada in which students were struggling and not meeting expected standards. In such schools, we implemented an arts-based approach to learning, which leveraged the enthusiasm of students for arts activities and connected this to the learning of the core curriculum. In each case, there

were clear and sometimes dramatic increases in test scores, especially in mathematics and improved cultural environments.

It is because of this fundamental belief in the importance of music study that when the COVID-19 crisis engulfed the world, our primary focus was to enable the continuation of the study of music by supporting the vast network of independent music teachers in North America, which numbers hundreds of thousands and reaches millions of students. This network, which operates outside of formal public education, is the basis of in-depth music education on our continent.

We set out to accelerate the development of our online programs in order to provide teachers with clear guidelines and courses so they could teach online in an effective way and thus keep music education



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going. We also enhanced our online coursework for students so that they could study music theory, music history, and ear training during a period when they actually had time. Lastly, we developed a means through which more than 35,000 students could take a music examination online this spring in a real-time interactive forum. This last step was important because the examination is the completion of a year of study and leads to the receipt of a diploma. This is an important motivating feature for many students.

Since our actions and those of others, we have seen dramatic changes in the teaching landscape and the move to digital delivery has been adopted in unprecedented numbers. Once things subside, there will be new hybrid models emerging that potentially can lead to more effective learning outcomes by students.

As all educational institutions are realizing, digital offers extraordinary opportunities for expanded participation in learning, and music is no exception. The digital focus extends at the RCM to our performing arts activity. We present over 200 concerts and events annually in our magnificent concert venue, Koerner Hall. The acoustics of the hall are considered to be among the greatest of any in the world by many of today's performing artists, from pianist Lang Lang and conductor Valery

Gergiev to cellist Yo-Yo Ma to Chick Corea and Wynton Marsalis. As a way to allow more people throughout the world to experience the unique ambiance and sound of Koerner Hall, we are making available all of our previously livestreamed events, and once we reopen we will increase their number.

To close, I want to reiterate my belief that widespread participation in music training and arts education has the ability to bring unprecedented benefits to society by developing the untapped potential of the individual. At a time when the study of music and the arts in public education is so highly diminished, it has never been more important to provide a viable counterbalance outside of public systems. Young people across North America need a spiritual and ennobling dimension to their lives that fosters a greater connection to humanity. This is a goal that is truly meaningful and therefore deserving of everyone's support. **LM**