

An Interview with the Royal Conservatory's Dr. Peter Simon

Stephen Pierce



Shortly after arriving in the United States in 2004 to begin my graduate studies, I learned of the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM), based in Toronto, Canada. Since that time, I have admired the RCM for their commitment to the arts and arts education, and for the many resources they offer to music students and teachers. I have used their repertoire books with my private students and in my university courses for many years, and enjoy having my students participate in the RCM Certificate Program examinations. In January, I even started working part-time for the RCM! As the world moved online this summer and students' performance opportunities evaporated, I was grateful to the RCM for moving their practical exams online rather than eliminating exams. With all of this in mind, I asked Dr. Peter Simon, Director and CEO of the RCM for almost three decades, if I could interview him for CAPMT Connect. He kindly obliged and below are his fascinating and engaging responses to my questions about the online exams and much more.

Stephen Pierce (SP): Hello Peter, thank you for this opportunity to interview you. You have served as President and CEO of the Royal Conservatory of Music since 1991. Firstly, how would you describe the role of the Royal Conservatory in society as it relates to the arts in general, and music education more specifically?

Peter Simon (PS): The work of The RCM is based on two foundational beliefs: that 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 and; that the study of music is the most powerful means through which young people can develop their full potential.

I believe that the study of music 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 ultimately academic achievement.

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. We have a very broad range of programs which are meant to support teachers and students. We also initiate projects in public schools in which students are struggling and not meeting expected standards. In such schools we implement an arts based approach to learning which leverages the enthusiasm of students for arts activities and connect this to the learning of the core curriculum.

Given my view that ultimately it is culture that truly determines the success and greatness of a nation, the work of the RCM in connecting millions of people in the shared experience of musical expression has shaped individual lives and culture.

SP: What is the educational value and benefit of a structured music assessment program such as the RCM Certificate Program?

PS: Structure is an important component of any educational process. There is a logical progression in development which builds upon a foundation. Our Certificate Program has been structured to provide a step by step developmental path in learning to make music. For parents the knowledge that there are benchmarks of achievement each year and also availability of an external evaluation, is important. For students, goals are necessary and our structure provides those points of arrival.

SP: Due to the current pandemic, the RCM offered online exams for the first time in their 134 year history. Personally, I was immensely grateful for these as they offered my own pre-college

students an opportunity to perform, and a goal to work towards. My students all thoroughly enjoyed playing their online exams from the comfort of their own living rooms and pianos. I have also heard from others that these have been incredibly successful and popular with teachers, students, and parents. Have you received similar feedback?

PS: Thank you and I am very glad that your students enjoyed the experience. We have monitored the satisfaction rate quite closely because after all this was initially a response to the limitations arising from COVID and an attempt by us to help students complete their year, to give them motivation at a difficult time and importantly to encourage students to continue their lessons. Over 80 percent of participants have indicated that they enjoyed the remote examination and would like to take another one. There remained a group who were uncomfortable but still thought it worked well in the end. The last ten percent accepted the necessity of a digital exam but still preferred the in-person experience. We did have glitches on occasion due to technology and some overloading of our scheduling system and will fix these as we move ahead. But overall, remote exams exceeded our expectations.

SP: Will you continue to offer online exams when we return to a more normal way of life?

PS: Yes we will. There are many students and teachers who live in remote areas and would need to travel great distances for an in-person exam. Online exams alleviate that issue. Also, there are students who really prefer to play in their home at a general time of their choosing, as this reduces their stress level. Of course, for parents there is the convenience issue and no need to find that elusive parking space.

SP: In your time as President and CEO of the RCM, you have launched so many initiatives and achieved a great deal. What are some of your proudest accomplishments?

PS: I believe that in our field one has to strive for the highest possible standard of excellence in all activities. This ranges from the quality of our curriculum, our teacher training and support networks, our professional training, our early childhood education programs, our performing arts series, and of course our facilities and concert halls. When I hear the students of our Taylor Academy or Glenn Gould School perform in Koerner Hall [a world-class recital hall located at the Royal Conservatory building in Toronto] it is hard not to feel proud. The students are extraordinary and show what can be achieved by young people when there is support but also high expectation. Koerner Hall is simply an amazing place in which one can hear music with an acoustic that is among the best in the world. Our building is an inspiration to enter and houses a community of likeminded people.

SP: One of the most exciting areas of development at the RCM are all of the superb digital learning offerings. What do all of these offer to music students and teachers?

PS: Digital learning has emerged through the crisis as a reality. However, I think that one has to achieve a careful balance that incorporates the many benefits of digital learning with the human exchange and contact that one cannot replace. Our goal was to make it easy for students to work on things such as ear training, theory, and music history throughout the week online and thus accelerate their learning process. For teachers, we have developed a range of helpful programs so that the collective experience and insights of thousands of educators could be shared and educational leaders could provide their own special ideas.

SP: You have also recently launched an exciting new Teacher Portal. What all is available and how can teachers take advantage of these offerings?

PS: We have launched a new version of our Teacher Portal recently. We offered free access so that teachers could benefit from the extensive content but also provide us with their views for improvement. The goal of the Portal is to provide a support structure for teachers that can encompass every aspect of their teaching lives. This means of course including hundreds of videos of outstanding teachers working through repertoire that students learn, access to recordings and performance videos, webinars on a range of topics such as financial management of studios and technology etc. It is meant to be a one stop resource center where teachers can find solutions to problems but also be inspired by the work of others and engage in continuous learning.

SP: Some of our readers might not know that you are a highly accomplished pianist and that you attended some of the most distinguished music schools, and studied with some highly illustrious teachers. What can you share about your earliest piano instruction with Boris Berlin?

PS: Mr. Berlin was very much of the Russian school with an emphasis on a singing line and the building of a solid technical foundation through which one could produce a full tone and never one that was hard or forced. He was a wonderful man and very kind to me but concurrently he had no reservations about raising his voice. I recall several instances when he told me that “this is the worst playing I have ever heard” and “what are you thinking playing like this.” I would wait until he had exhausted himself in this semi mock rage and understood the intent to motivate. In our third year together he said it was time for me to go to Juilliard and experience other points of view. His support for me never wavered and we remained friends until he passed away at the age of 97 – still sharp as ever.

SP: You also studied with Louis Kentner in London – a formidable Hungarian born British pianist. What did you learn most from him?

PS: At that point I had dropped out of Juilliard and was not attending school. I was living in London, practicing a lot and hearing concerts almost every night including Mr. Kentner at Albert Hall playing the Tchaikovsky B flat Concerto. Mr. Kentner had the most expansive repertoire of any pianist I have ever met and total recall of anything he had played. I once played the Fourth Scriabin Sonata for him thinking I had found something he could not just sit down and play immediately because he had never recorded Scriabin. As ever he sat down at the second piano and said as he usually did “dear boy – I think you are working far too hard at playing this” and then played the entire piece. He said the same of the Liszt B minor Sonata and asked why I just didn’t relax and just play. His point was that I had been driving so hard to attain technical command that I did not actually notice that I could actually play these works fairly well. It was exactly the message I needed at that point. He too was wonderfully supportive and helpful.

SP: I am so sorry about the passing of your former teacher, the legendary Leon Fleisher. What a huge loss for the music world! What do you think made him such an inspiring and influential teacher and performer?

PS: Leon’s great intellect was coupled with eloquence and a richness of language through which he could paint pictures that would inspire and elevate you. He was insistent on verbalizing and speaking about the fundamental character of a piece and what it was exactly that you were trying to convey. He made the point that without this absolute clarity of idea, intention, and goal there was little point in practicing because what exactly were you then practicing? Of course, his insights into music were a revelation and with every piece I played I felt that I had crossed a threshold of understanding. He also did not back away from the aspects that related to the execution of the ideas. He was uncompromising in accepting any deviations from the chosen path and was quick to point out how we undermined our own vision through a series of subtle compromises. There were core themes in his teaching – clarity of intention – being aware of compromises – precise execution of the idea – that hold true in all of life’s endeavors. The overarching theme however was humanism. Leon was a kind and generous man who helped people.

SP: You have met so many famous persons, from distinguished musicians and other celebrated performing artists, to important dignitaries such as the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau and the Queen! Do you ever get star struck? Are there any famous persons that stand out amongst all of those you have met?

PS: I remember vividly what an extraordinary smile the Queen had – wonderfully bright and open – a sincere, genuine smile and that made you feel that she was actually pleased to be in your company. Meryl Streep is another person who is without any guile, very intelligent, open and friendly and of course loves music. The most surprising interactions

were with Keith Richards and Ron Wood of the Rolling Stones. Keith was very well versed in classical music and loved music from the Baroque and Classical eras. We had gotten on to the odd topic of which music we would like at our funerals and Ron Wood said the second movement of the A major piano concerto K488 by Mozart. I have to admit my jaw dropped a few inches when he said that. KD Lang is a wonderful person and amazingly musical. She sang Halleluiah by Leonard Cohen in Koerner Hall with a simple piano accompaniment and it was one of the greatest performances I have heard. Lastly, I cherish the fact that I met and had some time with Oscar Peterson. He was thoughtful, dignified and an artist with incredibly high standards. I miss him a great deal.

SP: What advice would you give to music teachers and students during this challenging time of online teaching and learning?

PS: I would hope that all teachers understand just how important their work really is. Throughout North America we have seen a precipitous decline in music and arts programs for young people. This means that independent teachers and schools must provide a counterbalance to these highly corrosive developments. We all understand how difficult it is to be a teacher but also how inspiring it can be. I would make the case that music lessons for many young people are the most important developmental aspect of their lives. The neuroscience research is clear about the benefits of formal music study. Ultimately, young people across North America need a spiritual and ennobling dimension to their lives that fosters a greater connection to humanity.

For more information about the Royal Conservatory of Music, visit their website [here](#).



South African pianist, Dr. Stephen Pierce enjoys a multi-faceted career as a teacher, presenter, performer, clinician, and scholar. He teaches at the University of Southern California and privately in Pasadena. He is currently California's Vice-President for Conferences, Collegiate Chapter State Chair, and Editor of CAPMT Connect. He is also a Regional Representative for the Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) and a member of the RCM College of Examiners. He has presented at national conferences and published articles for the RCM, and in CAPMT Connect, Clavier Companion, Music Research Forum, Piano Pedagogy Forum, The California Music Teacher, and The South African Music Teacher.