

CBC Radio 1 Montreal Interview with Dr. Peter Simon



The following is a transcript of CBC Radio 1 Montreal's "Let's Go" program hosted by Sabrina Marandola who interviewed Dr. Peter Simon, President & CEO of The Royal Conservatory of Music on Monday, June 1, 2020 at 5:50 p.m.

Sabrina Marandola: Well, for the first time ever in the Royal Conservatory's history, practical music exams will be taking place online. They kick off this week. 20,000 students across North America will be completing their music exam over the next two months, and that includes students right here in Montreal. The first day of exams, tomorrow. So maybe some of you are practicing right now in your living room or bedroom.

And joining us now on the line to tell us more, Dr. Peter Simon. He's the President and CEO of the Royal Conservatory of Music. Dr. Simon, good afternoon. Welcome to the show.

Peter Simon: Well, thank you for having me.

Sabrina Marandola: It's great to talk to you today. Tell me more about this examination process that your students will be going through starting tomorrow.

Peter Simon: Yes, of course. Just by way of background, when the crisis hit, we believe that it was really important for young people to continue to make music during the crisis, to have an outlet for self-expression, to develop their skills and to have fun while they were confined in their homes. And there were hundreds of thousands of students who had been studying, through the Conservatory Certificate Program since the fall. And we wanted them to continue practicing taking lessons and to complete the year.

But in order to make all of this a reality, we would need to help the 30,000 music teachers across Canada, who constitute the vital infrastructure for music study in our nation, to learn to teach online. So, we opened up free courses for thousands of teachers to enable them to continue giving lessons.

Then we also developed a way to provide online music exams, and I believe we're the only organization in the world to do so at such a scale. As you mentioned, there are more than 20,000 exams in the month of June and the opportunity to complete their studies has given students motivation for taking lessons.

Sabrina Marandola: How did the 30,000 teachers across Canada respond when you said, okay, we're going to keep doing this, but we're moving everything online.

Peter Simon: Very positively. We conducted a survey. It was for 2,500 teachers. And the response rate, it was quite amazing because over 80% said that they were totally open to the concept. There was a group that said that they would need some help to get through this thing. And then there was a small group that said, well we're technology adverse. But the fundamental understanding, that in order to continue music study, in order to continue employment for the teachers and to keep this going, we had to go online. People really got that.

Sabrina Marandola: And with teaching music, I imagine there might be a big challenge there because for things, I'm thinking of piano. I mean, the teacher can see if your finger placement is right ... A lot of those things matter in the performance.

Peter Simon: Yes. So, we had tested online exams for over nine months previously. Now we didn't know that this was going to happen and that we'd have to implement it so quickly. But well, we give them instructions regarding the placement of the camera, regarding sound, how you can improve the sound, to get the best possible result. And we're able to see things like hand position, as you mentioned, and to hear well enough that we can give a guide to the performance. Obviously, it's not the same as being there, but our examiners have been trained, over the last month or so. And they make allowances for certain things that might happen, technical glitches and so on.

Sabrina Marandola: And I mean, we are seeing more and more festivals, musical events moving online as well, taking place behind our computer. Dr. Simon, how well would you say music translates online?

Peter Simon: Well, again, it's been surprising that so many music organizations have gone online to present concerts and people have been watching them. We've been doing live streaming, for example, from Koerner Hall, for quite some time and have very large audiences globally for it. But at the end of the day, a live performance is something special. There's a spiritual component to it, a human connection component to it. And it's very hard to replace that with an online performance.

Sabrina Marandola: And not to mention the delay. I know with technology, you often have a delay in the line and in music, timing is absolutely everything.

Peter Simon: It is. It's surprising how the technology has moved forward, in terms of things like delays. 10 years ago, we did a distance lesson online, for example, and there was a clear gap. But now, you can have ensembles online performing. So, it's just a lot better.

Sabrina Marandola: What has been the biggest challenge so far preparing for these digital exams?

Peter Simon: Well, multiple fronts. You have to have a very good IT infrastructure. You have to have people that are trained. You have to give very specific instructions to people, that in some cases are not knowledgeable with technology. You have to assure them that things are going to be fine. There has to be a preparation. We tell people to get ready the day before. So, all of these things.

But the last one's really the psychological breakthrough. To say, we're going to do it. That's where I think a lot of other organizations said, "Well, I don't think we can." When we got the feedback from the teachers though, that gave us a lot of confidence that people were ready to take this step.

And I'd say the other part, there was another to this step, the prospect of not having music study, not having music education. It was just not palatable to us. I mean, as an organization, and I say this to parents whenever I can, that the study of music is an essential part of the development of a young person. I mean, it's a fact that the study of music enhances cognitive development in children and improves their verbal and auditory abilities. Making music awakens, our imagination, leads to creative thought. It requires focus, discipline, the capacity to analyze patterns, all of which you need in school. And that's why music students excel academically. And then there's the issue of self-reflection and expression that is a fundamental human need. And the spiritual dimension of our children's lives just can't be forgotten...

Sabrina Marandola: Dr. Peter Simon, we have about 30 seconds left, what's your advice for music students listening, who maybe have their exam tomorrow and are practicing right now? Final words to them?

Peter Simon: Well, have a lot of fun. Be very relaxed. You're in the comfort of your own home. You know the instrument. The examiners are very, very nice and very encouraging. So, don't be nervous. Just play your heart out and it's going to be just fine.

Sabrina Marandola: Dr. Peter Simon, thank you so much for your time today. Best of luck over the next couple of months, as 20,000 students right across North America, take their exams for the first time online at the Royal Conservatory of Music. Dr. Peter Simon is the President and CEO.