



PETER SIMON
ROYAL CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC
Creative
INNOVATION

Wah Keung Chan



Photos: Cliff Spicer and Todd McLellan (Sugino Studios)

When you hear Royal Conservatory of Music (RCM) President Dr. Peter Simon talk about the importance of the arts in education, you can feel the passion of his visionary ideas. "Innovation is the future of our country, the root of innovation is creativity, and you get that through arts education," he said. Four hundred schools, 500,000 students and many Canadian philanthropists have already bought into Simon's and the RCM's vision. The recent opening of phase I of the \$120-million Telus Centre for Performance and Learning will see the RCM eventually reach another 500,000 students, entrenching it as Canada's leading institution in the arts.

The new facilities

The 122-year-old RCM has always been a national institution, "creating ideas and programs and systems of instruction that was taken across Canada, for music literacy and personal development," said Simon. Generations of Canadians have measured their musical education through the RCM Examinations. And some of Canada's great musicians, such as Glenn Gould, Gordon Lightfoot, Jon Vickers and Teresa Stratas started there.

The new facilities include state-of-the-art studios, which are isolated acoustically and fully loaded technologically to allow lessons to be given from Toronto to British Columbia or Nova Scotia. In each studio, teachers have access to web tools, and the expanded space will allow the RCM to host music and arts conferences. "The new 1100-seat Koerner Concert Hall, to be unveiled in September 2009, will be one of the great halls in the world," said Simon, who plans to invite international artists, such as Andras Schiff and Leon Fleisher, to interact with the students and give masterclasses. Of the 100 annual masterclasses, he plans to record one third and make them freely available on the Internet. The RCM's Glenn Gould Professional School now attracts 120 top professional level students, one third of which are foreigners. "Our greatest strength is that our kids get 50% to 100% more time with teachers than found at universities," said Simon.



The history of the new RCM

All of this activity pales in comparison to the RCM of 17 years ago, when the school was coming out of a messy divorce from the University of Toronto. For over 40 years, the RCM was the poor cousin of the University of Toronto Faculty of Music. In 1991, Peter Simon was hired as President to lead it through the transition. "It needed some energy and revitalization and I came back to do that. It is perhaps Canada's greatest cultural asset and I didn't think it was doing very well," he said.

At the time, the RCM was housed in Ichnatowycz Hall, a beautiful Victorian structure that was showing its age, with a leaky roof and in need of constant repair. Simon had to consolidate the RCM by cutting the number of Toronto campuses from six to two. He built his fundraising team gradually from zero to the current ten, growing donations from \$120,000 in 1992 to \$22.5 million in 2006. "Once you build an fundraising infrastructure there are huge returns," said Simon. "For most arts organizations, getting there is very difficult because they can't afford it; we have to think differently." In the 1990s, the RCM sought to create a database of its alumni with TV commercials on CBC-TV.

The RCM's most innovative project began in 1994. Learning through the Arts (LTTA) used the arts as an education tool in public schools. The school changed its mission statement – "To develop human potential through leadership in music and arts education." When Simon speaks about the motivation, he almost sounds evangelical: "Education without the arts is a travesty. Cuts to arts education happened, and we stood around and let it happen." Simon noticed that although many outreach programs sponsored by arts groups sprouted up in its place, they were not sustainable and arts literacy was still in decline. Simon went one step further with LTTA by commissioning studies to prove its validity. The program is evaluated

regularly by the University of Toronto and Queen's. The studies found that students scored 11% higher in Mathematics, had better attendance and were more involved in their studies. "Most students are disengaged," he said. "The lecture method is effective for 15% of students. The best way to get students interested is through an emotional connection with the arts. Once interested, the marks will go up by themselves."

Starting out with seven schools in its first year, LTTA now has 400 schools and is expanding worldwide, including in the UK and Ireland. "We offer teacher training and certification in several centres across Canada, in every province in Canada, for three to four weeks in summer," Simon said. "What's really great is if the entire school, every teacher is involved." It takes three years for a school to make the transition and the school fee is \$5000 to \$10,000 a year. "It's very low cost but a huge return."

What about talk of the demise of classical music? Simon refutes, "The numbers don't support it. The number of opera companies and orchestras have increased. This is timeless human creation. Why is it that the market for classical music is enormous in Japan and China, where there are 20 million students, yet it is not part of their cultural heritage? It's because music is not confined to nationality. It speaks to people and is timeless and universal. When you promote Canada in foreign markets like China, they know Canada through Glenn Gould because he represents innovation and creativity at the highest levels, and it speaks for everything in Canada."

Creative rewards

Simon realizes that his work is not yet done, given recent remarks from Stephen Harper that the arts are a niche. Simon is adamantly opposed. "It's simply wrong. That was an unfortunate statement Harper made; I don't think personally he believes it. You bear a responsibility to look at our society. We are supposed to create an innovative society with leading thinkers and that is not possible without the creativity found in the arts. Ontario is in a difficult situation right now. We have to make sure businesses are creative, intelligent forward-looking companies. The old 19th century model of the assembly line mentality to receive and regurgitate information is no good. Facts and information constantly change. The future is about great ideas. Microsoft and Google are idea-based companies. People, government and donors understand this."

The RCM board also understood that all of the organization's achievements would have been for naught without Simon at the helm. They recently rewarded him with a 10-year contract extension. "The RCM has offered me endless possibilities. I thought getting the RCM back on its feet might take five to ten years, and never thought of staying 17 years." It comes as a bit of a surprise that running a national arts institution was never in Simon's plans in his youth, when he trained as a concert pianist. "I was fortunate to come from a family who thought that creativity and artistry were perhaps the highest aspirations that you can have. Rather than being pushed to a profession, they gave me a freedom and a confidence to do what's valid," he said. "You are not achieving your full potential if you are not thinking of yourself as a creative person."

A classically trained CEO

Simon began his musical education at the RCM as a student of Boris Berlin. He went on to study at New York's Juilliard School and in London with Louis Kentner. After finishing a Doctorate at the University of Michigan under Leon Fleisher, Simon returned to Toronto to pursue his career in performance (about 20-30 concerts a year) and teaching (at the University of Western Ontario). "That was my plan; I wanted a balanced life," he said. Running Preview Concerts in Toronto motivated him to take a night course in Arts Administration at McMaster's University "to accelerate my learning curve." From there Simon, took on the position as Director of Academic Studies at the RCM before a two-year stint as president of the Manhattan School, where he introduced the first Master's Degree in



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Orchestral Performance in the US. It was there that he formulated his idea for arts education.

How did his musical training help him develop as a CEO? "I always worked hard and I was used to working seven days a week. As a musician you are constantly trying to go deeper, to find a better, truer way, which helped me realize that superficiality is not worthy of attention. You learn compromise, the more you compromise, the more you get away from the truth of the music. You are constantly faced with choices where you are forced to compromise. We make a decision - what is the impact on the final goal? Our goal of excellence is always to do everything to the best of our ability. As a leader, you must have that orientation. You cannot say something is good enough. It's also about dealing with people. In music, you are working with people all the time. The fundamentals are there."

What's your secret to fundraising? "You have to have a passion for what you are doing. People can tell if you really believe what you are saying and are committed to it. There is a dogged persistence about fundraising, you have to be there every day, and you have to constantly expand your relationship with people and it's a process-oriented thing. The more people you get to know, the more people you can see, the more success you will be. It's a great cause that we are representing. You have to be determined, and not relax, or you fall backwards."

Future expansion

When asked what constitutes the next 10 years of his 27-year plan, Simon laughed. He plans to launch a concert production program in the new hall and expand the RCM's examination, curriculum and books in China and the US. He's also devoted to a new arts-based online program, "so kids can have a fundamental relationship with arts and creativity but in a language they are current with." He also plans to expand the Young Artist Performance Academy from its current weekend format to full-time, and increase the number of students from 70 to 100, hopefully on full scholarship. "Lastly, I want to have a greater impact in early childhood. Working with young children is virtually all arts based, yet people in daycare centres are not trained and certified. We could give parents tools, to really work with kids, to get learning and cognitive development at a far early age. We have been working with ages 4-5-6, and that is the future." If only we had people like him running our country. ■

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