

Simon says

As head of the Royal Conservatory of Music, Peter Simon has turned the place upside down, pushing a controversial \$60-million reno job and introducing (the horror!) acid jazz and world music to the playlist. How a fusty old school got its groove back

IT TAKES ME A LITTLE WHILE TO WORK UP the gumption to enter the Royal Conservatory of Music. I'm here to interview the school's head, Peter Simon, but I'm paralyzed at the door. I tell myself I'm pausing outside to admire the refurbished front, its majestic corbels and glinting bay windows, its stone setbacks, steeply pitched slate roof and towering brick chimneys. And to check out the progress on the proposed \$60-million addition—which will include a glassed-in atrium and a 1,000-seat shoebox concert hall in the rear. But past and possible future architectural glories are not really on my mind. I can't enter the Con (as both boosters and detractors call it) without queasy memories of a Grade 1 piano recital, when I played "The Bronze Bear"—adequately but in the wrong octave. It was my first and last concert performance. The perfect, pinafored girl after me had prepped the same song. She tossed those pigtails just so upon assuming the bench, as if to state that she, at least, was going to begin in the right place on the keyboard.

This is the Conservatory most people know. For more than 100 years, it has been a bastion of a certain kind of competition-driven, excellence-oriented music education. Glenn Gould trained at the school, as did operatic stars Jon Vickers and Teresa Stratas. In fact, one in nine Canadians has studied with the institution's 20,000 accredited teachers, who are spread out across the country.

The stodgy old Con still exists, but a new one is emerging on the same premises. When I finally work up the nerve to enter the building, I'm greeted by the expected din leaking into the halls from the imperfectly soundproofed studios: a trumpeter rehearsing the "William Tell Overture"; an alto warbling out arpeggios. But they are accompanied by snatches of some formerly verboten musical styles: the syncopated rhythms of



acid jazz, swirling samba, even some licks of electric guitar. This new Con is the embodiment of Peter Simon, who, when he started 14 years ago, looked like the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. The modern Conservatory is lean, corporate in its values and still obsessed with excellence, but under Simon, it has become one of the key players in the city's current cultural renaissance.

IN PETER SIMON'S OFFICE, A PALAMINO Steinway, donated long ago by Lady Eaton, represents the old Con's traditional forte in piano training. Although Simon will sometimes play it to end a busy day, the large chart that hangs on the wall is more central to his work, a better evocation of the Con he's built. It looks to have emerged from a management consultancy, with the radiating spokes pointing to

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the Conservatory's activities, many of them new.

The 55-year-old Simon talks a business talk, but an artistic temperament still lurks underneath. Born in Hungary, he is the son of a mining engineer who fled the country in 1956, when the Soviet tanks rolled in. Simon had started playing piano in Budapest but had to stop in Toronto, until his family got on its feet financially. He resumed at age 10, moving through the Con's ranks, then to Juilliard.

As head of the Conservatory, he has become something of a society figure. I've seen him chatting speedily with the likes of Ken Thomson and jet-set jeweller Nicola Bulgari (at the Con's spring benefit) or mingling with a who's who of literary, legal and culinary Toronto (at the fall launch of Lucy Waverman and James Chatto's food-and-drink book). He has also transformed himself into one of that new breed, the "cultural entrepreneur," as the RCM's former board head, Bob Rae, describes him. He joins a handful of like-minded individuals who have altered the city's cultural landscape in the past 20 years: Soulpepper's Albert Schultz, the Canadian Opera Company's Richard Bradshaw, CanStage's Marty Bragg and Tafelmusik's Jeanne Lamon, among others. All are people who must continually shift hats—between business bowler and artistic beret.

In Simon's case, cultural entrepreneur puts it a bit too mildly: he now appears a man who was diverted by a decent amount of musical talent (he performed for 10 years) from his natural career in business. The zest with which he raises funds, the pleasure he takes in profits and the pain he feels in losses all signal that he loves his work, probably far more than he ever imagined he would.

When Simon took over in 1991, the Con had been in decline for more than three decades. It had opened its doors in 1886 as the Toronto Conservatory of Music, one of many competing private academies that started up in the piano-mad late-Victorian period. Through a series of mergers, it gradually became the pre-eminent piano institute in the country, invigilating tests, publishing books of progressively harder pieces for students to master, and sending examiners west with the railroad as it was being built. One adventurous early examiner is said to have travelled 9,500 kilometres in 40 days—by train, steamer, horse-drawn carriage and automobile.

After the Con's annexation by U of T in the 1950s, the university's board of governors shunted the music academy from

quaint and decrepit digs (on the site of the present Hydro building, at College and University) to quainter and more decrepit ones on Bloor (the old McMaster building). While the Conservatory had to put buckets on the floor of its adopted home to catch seeping rainwater, the university's faculty of music got a new building in 1962, a teasing beacon of modernity a mere hop and skip down Philosopher's Walk. The faculty also gradually usurped the Con's traditional role of grooming talented university-age musicians for the concert stage, turning the once proud Conservatory into a glorified prep school.

In the '80s, a succession of principals at the embattled Con came, saw and were conquered. Simon might well have followed suit: in his first two years, after he formalized the Conservatory's long-mooted separation from the university, the Con lost \$2 million. But Simon wasn't about to give up. He had studied at the Conservatory under Boris Berlin, a Russian expat who taught from 1928 until his death in 2001, and he felt a real sense of obligation to the school. "Boris would tell me stories about travelling by railroad to small towns, of discovering a marvelous young player in some tiny village. I had this feeling that it had once been great—and that maybe it could be again."

SIMON HAS AN ERA-APPROPRIATE TITLE: he is the Con's first president, not a dean or principal as his antecedents styled themselves. And he dresses the corporate part: instead of fusty academic tweeds, he habitually turns himself out in blue suits and silk power ties.

To stem the Con's financial hemorrhaging, Simon decided to downsize in 1993, firing 106 teachers and 15 staffers and closing seven of its local branches (only the Mississauga branch remains). In interviews at the time, he was unapologetic, dismissing the suggestion that the Con would lose its pre-eminence: "I have never heard such shit in my life," he told the *Star*. He's less touchy on the subject now, perhaps because it's obvious that his choice was the right one. "We didn't have an endowment to cushion us," he says. "One has to make difficult decisions to allow the organization to survive and to move forward."

While cutting down expenditures, Simon also made a concerted effort to increase revenues, by hiring deputies as attentive to the bottom line as to the quality of the programs they administer. On his watch, they've almost doubled, from \$14 million to \$27 million. Simon exults, every inch the corporate head: "Our earned revenues are in excess of 80 per

cent of our expenditures." And, with no fundraising tradition, Simon's Con has garnered a whopping \$100 million in private and public philanthropy.

Simon joined the uproar over education cuts in the '90s, but unlike most of his peers, he transformed his outrage into action. Rather than send a cadre of instructors into the schools to replace music teachers lost through cuts, Simon thought bigger: "We didn't want the arts marginalized, kept in a ghetto." The result was Learning Through the Arts, introduced in 1994 and represented by a bubble on his wall chart. The innovative program employs artists as guest lecturers at public schools to help teach core subjects—math, science and history. In practice, this means a musician plays students through the phases of African-American history, as evidenced in spirituals, blues, jazz, soul, rap and hip hop. In another class, a dancer teaches elementary geometry by getting students to walk along the perimeters of shapes taped on the floor.

It sounds airy-fairy, but Simon's deputy in charge of the program, a redoubtable former teacher, Angela Elster, took two steps typical of the new Con. She first sweated out the finances, securing a mix of private foundation, public, corporate and community money to pay for the \$1,500 it costs per classroom per year. Then, with Simon's encouragement, she had the program's results quantified, commissioning a study that concluded students in LTTA schools scored 11 per cent higher in math than their peers. Simon jokes, "I'm still waiting for the government official who praises a school's math program for increasing its students' scores on standardized music exams."

The results have helped the Con to raise funds, and the program has subsequently been rolled out to more than 300 primary, middle and high schools. And it has since been exported, with Elster as its well-travelled international evangelist, to 11 countries, among them Sweden, the United States and Japan.

FOR A DECADE AFTER THE CON'S SEPARATION from U of T, the faculty and Conservatory folk did not speak to each other—such was the animosity generated by the split. Since 1991, the power imbalance between the two has shifted, and now, from a position of strength, Simon is in talks with the faculty's incoming dean, Gage Averill, to see whether any common ground can be found. For the present, each is opening up its master classes to the other's students. But the Glenn Gould School—the Con's ambitious attempt to prepare university-age students for per-

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forming lives, to take back some of the students poached during its dark years—is clearly a thorn in Averill's side. "Our activities are complementary," he says, "but the sticking point in the past decade has been the Conservatory's efforts to create a university-age program."

Simon is quick, however, to market the Gould as different from what's on offer at the university. "We aren't about giving students breadth, teaching them musicology and music history," he says. "We're only focused on honing their musical craft."

The school remains small, educating 130 students (compared with U of T's 570), and its \$5-million endowment is paltry (compared with Juilliard's almost \$1 billion U.S.). But already students are coming from far afield, most notably Li Wang, the talented Chinese-born pianist whose training here has enabled him to

To fit all the facilities the Conservatory wants on its small plot of land, architect Marianne McKenna of the Toronto firm KPMB had proposed demolishing the Victorian annex. Critics, among them Larry Richards, the former dean of U of T's architecture school, and Allan Gottlieb, honorary chair of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, objected particularly to the loss of the annex's central staircase. "There are relatively few really excellent buildings from the high Victorian period left totally intact and loved and cared for," Richards argues. This is somewhat ironic, in that Richards' own institution left the Con to save the high-Victorian exemplar when it was on the verge of a literal breakdown. (During the 1990s, Simon cobbled together \$10 million to renovate the Con's home, buttressing floors, exfoliating the façade and plugging holes in the slate roof.)

Even in halls crammed with students of all ages and races, the Ghanaian-born instructor, Kwasi Dunyo, is easily identifiable. He's wearing a dashiki, loose-fitting trousers and kufi hat, all in a matching bright turquoise. But he's made some allowance for the Canadian climate: his shoes are sturdy oxfords with thick rubber soles.

There is some kerfuffle over who gets the room and when; McMaster Hall is so bursting with competing classes that even the attics are now in use 16/7. When Dunyo finally takes possession, his students busy themselves, unloading the drums, their worn leather stretched taut across the top. Dunyo separates the 10 students into twosomes and then drums out a rhythm that each pair must continue, ignoring the beats rapped by other pairs. "Anyone can learn music," Dunyo says in one of his talks between

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win, place and show at several prestigious international piano competitions. The Conservatory also had the good sense to admit engineering student Isabel Bayrakdarian, who has gone on to debut at the Met, thereby restoring some of the lustre to the Con's diminished reputation in voice training.

Still, U of T continues to attract many promising students. As Averill baldly states, "We're not going away." And money continues to be a struggle for the fledgling Gould. Some eight years after its founding, one in three applicants now gets a berth, but the Con can't yet afford to grant many full scholarships. As a result, some of its students have to busk on the streets to pay their way, or rely on canned food left in the building's basement by sympathetic professors. The university, on the other hand, can offer a range of bursaries, and it has no shortage of talented alumni. If the Con coached Bayrakdarian, the faculty graduated another contender in the diva sweepstakes, Measha Brueggergosman.

IN TORONTO'S ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY, this will go down as the year of the controversial staircase. At the AGO, the staircase Frank Gehry proposed at first won oohs and aahs for the otherwise workaday design, but then was altered after the Tanenbaums complained. The other staircase is the spiral one in the Con's Victorian annex, at the rear of the building, and it became the centre of a brouhaha about the school's proposed expansion.

Unless the province decides to intervene, the old building will come down and a new one will replace it, provided the full \$60 million (plus overruns) needed for the new facility can be raised. (Current estimates put the Conservatory at close to \$50 million.) Simon's bullish staff, confident of the project's completion, have already met with other local cultural organizations, including the Toronto International Film Festival, Tafelmusik, Opera Atelier and the Toronto Children's Chorus, to offer them the use of the hall—as always in the new Con, at a fee.

In addition to a shift in organizational culture—from academic to corporate—on Simon's watch, the Con has departed from its classical-music-only orientation. Beginning in the fall of 2003, it expanded its community school offerings to include world music and contemporary: DJ Lil' Jaz a.k.a. Jasper Gahunia a.k.a. Nellie Furtado's hipster boyfriend teaches spinning (LPs, not stationary bicycles); a Cape Breton-trained fiddler helps her students liberate the violin's long-suppressed party potential. The community school's MBA-equipped dean, Jeff Melanson, has turned a money-loser into a break-even proposition, even as he continued to broaden the curriculum. "You would think that the president of a conservatory—the word itself being a relative of 'conservative'—would object to adding electronica to the mix," says Melanson, "but Peter didn't."

I'm invited to sit in on one of the new courses, an African drumming class.

songs. "It comes from within, but you have to try."

As if to test this hypothesis, Dunyo insists that I participate. He hands me a drum and tells me to follow my partner. Ignoring the rhythms beat out by others is much harder than it seems. I get it, then I lose it; like skipping rope, you have to enter at the right moment or you get caught out. I again find the beat but fumble it just as quickly. I'm thinking this out hard, but that's not helping. When I stop thinking, it starts to come. Suddenly, I'm supporting my partner and he's supporting me, and my breathing becomes governed by the beat. And then it's over—only I don't get the hidden cue and stop a few seconds late.

Dunyo's class is filled with an eclectic mix of people, but there's one thing uniting them. For two hours, they seem engrossed and, more than that, happy. They're not just cheerful—they beam at each other. They are connected, all getting lost in the rhythm. In this isolating city, it's a rare vision.

After "The Bronze Bear" fiasco, a musical godmother gave me a book by the flamboyant conductor and polyglot Leonard Bernstein: *The Joy of Music*. Its title struck me then as odd—I didn't think of joy and music as natural companions at that point. But they are, of course. Notwithstanding its businessy ethos, in the halls of the new Con, in Peter Simon's driven, lean organization, the two halves of this long estranged former couple are becoming reacquainted. ■