

THE CANADIAN RENAISSANCE MUSIC SUMMER SCHOOL

The Canadian Renaissance Music Summer School 2021 Report

Greg Skidmore, Artistic Director

Peter Phillips, Patron

Renaissance Music in troubled times

The Canadian Renaissance Music Summer School, along with so much else that we cherish, was denied us in 2020 because of the global Covid-19 pandemic. These incredibly difficult months made CRMSS 2021 seem much more important, and in fact more necessary. Taking all the recommended safety precautions seriously meant that singing together was sometimes challenging, but we all knew the effort was worth the reward - and what a reward we gained!

“Being part of CRMSS last summer was transformative.”

During eight packed days, we learned, experimented, socialised (at a distance), and sang like crazy, almost as though we were making up for lost time. While safety was everyone's top priority, we also knew that we were back doing what we were supposed to do - be together, make music together, and, together, create something important and beautiful. CRMSS in normal times is meant to be a full-on week, challenging and exhausting in all the right ways. In 2021, it certainly was that and more! The unique feel of CRMSS 2021 - 'bubbled' away from the rest of the world - is unlikely to be repeated, and all of us keenly felt its significance. In a way, CRMSS 2021 felt like more than just another summer music course.

“Our time spent together during CRMSS has created lasting memories that I shall hold onto for many years to come.”

Where and when

CRMSS 2021 started in the early evening on **Friday, August 27th** and we sang our final Compline service together on **Friday, September 3rd**. In a departure for us, we moved the entire course to one single, new venue: First-St. Andrew's United Church (FSA) in downtown London, Ontario. We had access to the large sanctuary for tutti sessions, which offered us more than enough space to comfortably be socially distanced, and many smaller rooms for small-group work, singing lessons, lectures, etc.

There were two ways in which the singers were split into smaller ensembles. First, there were two 'chamber choirs' made up of roughly half the group each. Each person was also allocated a 'small group' for one- or two-on-a-part singing. These sessions were all led by one of our tutor team and everyone had a chance to sing in these ensembles as part of our final performance.



Everyone also had a chance to have some technical vocal tuition. We were joined for the first three days of the course by Katherine Hill, one of Toronto's leading singing teachers and Early Music practitioners and she took the lead in this part of the course. A particular interest of hers is in working with small groups of singers in exploring vocal technique. It was great to have her with us.

Following on from Katherine's technical work at the beginning of the week, Lucas Harris worked with a selection of the participants who were interested in pursuing solo singing. Being a soloist is encouraged at CRMSS and we're proud that we've been able to maintain this emphasis.

As has now become a cherished CRMSS tradition, each evening we came together in the wonderful FSA sanctuary to sing the monastic 'night prayer' service, called Compline. As we only performed at FSA in 2021, and were unable to explore other venues, these Compline services became a real point of focus for us.



On the last day, we performed two concerts: a private concert of chamber music (chamber choirs, small groups, and soloists) attended only by CRMSS 2021 participants and tutors, and a larger concert in which we performed tutti choral repertoire. While the course was 'bubbled' the entire week and access to the church campus was strictly controlled, we were able to invite a small number of our ardent supporters to hear the final tutti concert. Like much at CRMSS 2021, the logistics of this event were a little strange: our 'audience' of invited guests sat high up in the balcony at the back of the church while we sang from the floor of the sanctuary but it was a special privilege for us to share a little of what we'd learned over the course of our time together.

**“People are amazed when we tell them that we sang for seven days,
rehearsed 182 pages of music, and then performed!”**

CRMSS 2021 Staff and Participants

Because of the global travel disruption, we were unable to welcome our usual lineup of internationally based staff. However, some home-grown talent more than made up for this loss! Our Founder and Artistic Director, Greg Skidmore, was able to travel from the UK and he was joined by a stellar team.

- **Greg Skidmore**, Founder and Artistic Director
- **Dr. Kate Helsen**, Academic lead
- **Lucas Harris**, Solo Song coordinator and Lute Day leader
- **Katherine Hill**, Resident vocal technique specialist
- **Dr. Aaron James**, CRMSS 2021 organist
- **Dr. Patrick Murray**, Conducting tuition lead
- **Sharang Sharma**, Practical Musicianship lead
- **Terry McKenna**, Lute Day tutor

The make-up of our tutor team evolved during the week to accommodate the performing schedules of several of our Torontonians. However, each staff member was featured in their own ways, providing incidental music or canting at Compline, or providing instrumental accompaniment whenever the need arose.

With such a large team of staff, we were able to run many parallel sessions. Each tutor spent time with each small group and Sharang led some smaller skills sessions dedicated to reading from plainsong notation and polyphonic facsimiles.



“It was good having the tutors rotate around the small ensembles and chamber choirs, so we got different ideas from each person.”

“Your tutors were excellent! Really inspiring. Each warmup was really interesting, with all sorts of new ideas each time.”

There was an unavoidable decrease in participant numbers in 2021 because of the pandemic. In total, there were 28 participants this year. Included in that figure were two lutenists who attended CRMSS 2021 Lute Day (see more on that below), and one person who audited the course, enjoying more flexibility to attend fewer sessions.

Even with the obvious obstacles to attendance, we again welcomed a broad range of singers: over half were 35 years old or younger and around the same number were either still in full time music education or were recent graduates.



Two participants joined us from the USA (and one endured terrible travel disruption on her way to London Ontario, eventually arriving at her hotel well after midnight the day before the course began - but stuck it out anyway and no one would have known!) and we again welcomed people from across Canada.

Lute Day

CRMSS Lute Day was introduced at CRMSS 2021! Lucas took on this event entirely and, with the help of Terry McKenna, prepared and led a few sessions only for lutenists which took place on **Sunday, August 29th**. There were four lutenists in total involved - quite a thrill for those involved in what is often a solitary calling. They enjoyed sessions on:

- **Ground bass**
- **Divisions**
- **Lute duets**
- **Ensemble playing**
- **'Lute tasting'!** (ask a lutenist if you're confused...)

As a special treat, Katherine joined them for some lute song and Terry brought his newly edited and researched Psalm settings for the group to work on and hear.

Toward the end of the day, just before Katherine caught her train back to Toronto, she and the lutenists gave a private concert for all CRMSS 2021 participants and tutors in the sanctuary at FSA - a definite treat for everyone!

“He's really a wonder, Lucas is (and one of the kindest human beings in existence).”

“Loved all the lute crossover. Lucas was a wonderful asset to the program.”

CRMSS 2021 Repertoire

As 2021 was an important anniversary for those who love Renaissance polyphony, 500 years since the death of Josquin des Prez, we focussed this year on Franco-Flemish music. (The fact that Josquin died on August 27th, 1521, exactly 500 years before we all convened for CRMSS 2021, did not go unnoticed...) As normally happens at CRMSS, our theme was broad and we interpreted it that way, including anything by any French or Flemish or Dutch composer! We of course sang music by Josquin but also heard early organ music by Arnolt Schlick, sang drinking songs by Gabrielle Bataille, and enjoyed Italian madrigals by Giaches de Wert.

The repertoire performed by the tutti ensemble of singers was drawn together by Josquin's very famous (and very wonderful!) motet *Praeter rerum seriem*. We also worked through Cipriano de Rore's extraordinary mass setting based on this work, entitled *Missa Praeter rerum seriem*, and briefly looked at a Magnificat setting by Orlande de Lassus also connected with the Josquin piece. Lassus made quite a few appearances scattered across the week's repertoire, including an upper-voice trio at Compline one evening as well as repeated renditions of his utterly ravishing 6-voice *Alma redemptoris mater* setting. We also tackled one of the thickest works of Flemish contrapuntal labyrinthine wizardry, Nicolas Gombert's *Magnificat Tertii et octavi toni* - a real achievement for us over the course of the whole week.



“I love Greg’s conducting style. It is very generous and inviting, and it calls people out to sing their best in a safe space. His passion for the music infuses the experience.”

In our chamber choirs, we looked at music by Clemens non Papa, Jean Richafort, Philippe de Monte, Adrian Willaert, and Giaches de Wert and the small groups worked on music by Jean L'Heritier, Philippe Rogier, Jacobus Vaet, Hubert Waelrant, and others. The music of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck made regular appearances - at Compline, in small groups, and often coming from the organ as well.

“I enjoyed the small ensemble work. It was nice that the directors let us make decisions about rehearsal and interpretation.”



Lucas led the solo singing side of the course this year and worked with quite a few singers on music from the large and relatively unknown 'Air de cour' repertoire from early 17th-century France. This was very special for those who took part, as much of the music had never been sung before. Lucas worked with the singers on this unique and beautiful solo repertoire throughout the week and the soloists performed at the private chamber music concert held on the last day.

Lectures

As always at CRMSS, the focus of the academic side of the course came through our afternoon lectures:

- **Sharang Sharma**, "Tips and Tricks with Sharang: An Introduction to Practical Music Making when singing Renaissance Music"
 - Sharang led us through a fascinating exploration of the basics of music theory as would have been known by someone living in the 16th century, and how that knowledge can be applied today. Then, over the course of the week, he worked with small groups of singers on sight-reading from facsimiles of early 16th-century music.



- **Dr. Kate Helsen**, "Josquin des Prez: Choose your own adventure"
 - Kate showed us that Josquin isn't really the Josquin we think he is and also encouraged us to realise that the stories we tell about the great composers of the past change over time and all work together to build the incomplete - but fascinating - portraits we have today.
- **Dr. Aaron James**, "A helping hand: Guido, Hexachords, Solmization, and Musicianship in the Renaissance"
 - Tying in with the brilliant work Sharang was doing throughout the week, Aaron gave a lecture all about the birth and development of solmization, the practice of putting 'ut, re, mi, etc' syllables to pitches in singing - the foundation of chant and general music theory.
- **Dr. Patrick Murray**, "Anything but 'Ordinary': Bringing a Renaissance mass to life in contemporary performance"
 - Patrick's broader exploration of Josquin's *Missa Hercules dux Ferrariae* showed us the many different ways in which we as modern performers, conductors, composers, and audience members approach music written centuries ago and how understanding these can improve our performances.



Conducting Masterclass

Along with Lute Day, another major debut at CRMSS 2021 was our first ever Conducting Masterclass, led by Dr. Patrick Murray. Six of our participants were bold enough to stand up in front of the entire group and have a go, under Patrick's supportive guidance, with helpful interjections from Lucas and Greg.

There were some complete beginners and a few who were rather experienced conductors in their own right. We covered issues that were applicable to all choral situations and also those specific to the unique nature of polyphonic counterpoint; what Renaissance music needs and how it works perhaps a bit differently from other kinds of choral music.

Compline

Because of the lack of planned socialising, no trips to other venues, and general 'bubbled' feel of the course in 2021, our evening services of Compline took on a special significance this year. Over the course of the week we developed our own 'house style' and many of the simple plainsong melodies of the Compline service were well memorised by the last day.

“The daily Compline services, which were totally new to me, ended up being my favourite part of the day.”

Each service was slightly different (different people took the role of cantor, there were slightly different readings, different anthems or psalm settings, etc) but the reliability of ending each day in the same way, together, became a wonderful way for us to build together a very special CRMSS 2021.

CRMSS 2022

In 2022, we are planning to be back at full strength! Our first CRMSS Guest Artist, Robert Hollingworth, will bring his inimitable energy, wit, knowledge, and enthusiasm to the course, and we'll be joined by the first CRMSS International Scholars as well. Back in our original venue of Huron University College at Western University, we look forward to exploring the expressive and passionate sound worlds of Iberian and Latin American Renaissance music.

Please don't hesitate to contact our Founder and Artistic Director, Greg Skidmore: info@crmss.org

There is a great deal more information, including a greeting from our patron and director of The Tallis Scholars, Peter Phillips, on our website: crmss.org

We look forward to seeing you for what will be another incredible week of music making, friendship, and indulging in the exquisite pleasure of wall-to-wall Renaissance music!

“It was a splendid week, and the tutors did a wonderful job of making it so”

“Thanks again for all the time you have devoted to creating an amazing, music-filled week!”

“Thank you to all who made it happen, and thank you so much for the gift of a singing week!!!”



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