



Building a Digital Cultural Community for Canada and its Young People

2016 Pre-Budget Submission

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Executive Summary

The Royal Conservatory of Music is pleased to present its recommendations for measures to be included in Budget 2016 to Finance Canada.

The Royal Conservatory is one of the largest and most respected music education institutions in the world, and was established in 1886, not long after Canada itself. The Conservatory provides the definitive global standard of excellence in music curriculum design, assessment, performance training, and teacher certification. The Conservatory's systems and publications support an industry of 30,000+ private music teachers across the country, operating in urban, suburban, rural and remote communities – from coast-to-coast-to-coast. With approximately 500,000 annual participants in its programs and five million alumni, The Conservatory is a fundamental building block in the development of creativity and shared experiences among Canadians.

In this submission, The Royal Conservatory will emphasize that building a digital cultural community for Canada and its young people and investing in cultural infrastructure will enhance opportunities for all Canadians to succeed in the innovation economy. Our initiatives align with the current Government commitment to invest in the Canada's cultural and creative industries to create jobs, grow the middle class and strengthen our rich Canadian heritage.

The Government of Canada recognizes that media and digital technologies are evolving rapidly and to truly benefit from these opportunities the RCM is seeking an investment of \$12.5 million over a five year period to enable the creation of this important initiative.

Introduction

The RCM sees an enormous opportunity to merge the extraordinary power of the arts to foster individual growth and social cohesion with digital technology to unveil a new era of creativity and innovation among all Canadians. We want to build a digital platform that delivers the future of engagement in culture and fosters a creative, resourceful and resilient workforce.

Our plan builds upon more than a decade of systematic experimentation and prototyping within contemporary digital idioms and will result in the re-imagining and curation of the vast wealth of resources that reside throughout the organization and will draw on key collaborative partnerships with Canadian leaders in innovation, technology and cultural engagement.

Over the past 130 years The RCM has made a profound contribution to the development of creativity among millions of Canadian and built a large infrastructure spanning the nation. The RCM is a world leader in the development of learning systems, has a proven and successful business model and an established market consisting of 30,000 teachers and 500,000 students (20,000 in the United States).

Today employers require a workforce comprised of people with creative thinking skills that result in a competitive edge. Families want children's screen time to be put to productive uses. Educators are seeking help to redesign learning for a new era of student engagement and communities want to sustain a vibrant local culture that will help them remain competitive with larger centres. We can contribute significantly to meet each of these needs.

The impact of Technology

The nature of youth engagement has been profoundly disrupted by mobile technology – this is as true for the cultural sector as any other. Young people experience culture primarily through their phones, tablets, and laptops. If it is not immediately accessible on their devices, it does not happen. More than ever, children influence behavioral and purchasing decisions in the family so drawing children and youth into the cultural sphere must be accomplished through the device and designed specifically for youth.

The implications are significant for the Conservatory and all arts and cultural organizations. Many of the formats that have worked in the past - and which relied on parents to activate youth participation - have to be reinvented for an era of youth agency.

We believe that the enormous creative potential that is unleashed by arts activities deserves to be stimulated and cultivated on a Canadian platform. By leveraging the wealth of knowledge and resources of The RCM and partnering with Canadian innovators, we have the opportunity to meet children and youth where they live and play – in the digital realm – enrich their lives through the transformative power of the arts and stimulate the future of Canadian culture.

Designed for Success

Our vision is the creation of a virtual environment that serves as a platform for the cultivation of curiosity, appreciation, knowledge acquisition, creativity, community, and ultimately, a desire for deeper engagement with the arts, be that wanting to learn an instrument, finding creative ways of communication or other forms of social innovation.

The intention is to stimulate a wide range of cultural experiences: beginning with something familiar, something young Canadians are already Googling on their phones. We aim to give them the tools to listen, deconstruct, and personalize and share the content. This formula will be applied across multiple genres of music, and incorporate the Canadian music and musicians who are inspiring today's youth. The same format can be used to bridge music to other digital media that are central to youth's cultural experience today, such as podcasts, games, and video.

The Conservatory's plan focusses on four pillars: breadth of content, high attention to UX design, personalized experiences, and affordable access.

Breadth of content is the key to sustaining youth participation over time. This will be accomplished through leveraging The Conservatory's huge diversity of content, ranging from online tools and resources related to building blocks of musical creativity, to performances, presented in a manner meant to invite participation, present unexpected insights and connections and stimulate participation and creativity. Because youth look to public figures as heroes and icons, creating connections with RCM alumni and with Canada's leading musicians across jazz, classical, pop, singer songwriter, urban, and world music, will result in a deeper interest in the arts and artists. This content will be extended further through partnerships with leaders in urban music and arts, digital media arts, and social technologies.

UX Design is today's benchmark for engagement with content. Research shows that users decide within seconds whether to invest scarce attention on a site or app. The winners in this competitive battle for attention are those who invest most heavily in user experience (UX). Indeed, the high costs of UX design are largely responsible for the concentration of the technology industry today. The Conservatory will make UX its first priority.

Personalized experiences and pathways are the cornerstone of effective sites and apps. Users have come to expect that sites will respond to their pattern of use and learn from this in order to suggest worthwhile extensions. The Conservatory will design algorithms that support this degree of personalization and suggest 'next experiences' that will be most productive for each user while also stimulating creative connections and community.

Affordable access will be provided in accordance with today's best practices in the content and app industries, where users have grown used to being offered initial free access to a limited set of resources, with a variety of options, including low cost monthly subscriptions, permitting them to go deeper over time with minimal financial risk.

The success of a resource of this nature is the freshness of content, the creation of new challenges, resources and opportunities for connections. It will not only take about two years to build but as a living entity will need to be cultivated and managed.

Expertise

The Royal Conservatory has the expertise to oversee the building and management of this new cultural infrastructure:

- It has a superb team of instructional designers led by one of Canada's foremost e-learning experts, Chief Digital Officer Sarah Irwin. Instructional design is at the centre of successful engagement in cultural experiences. The Conservatory has a wide range of subject-area experts to contribute content that is relevant and well designed.
- It has demonstrated capabilities around partnership development and community engagement.
- It has a long history, via its social innovation arm, Learning Through the Arts, of collaborating with First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities to design culturally inclusive programming.
- It has connections to dozens of youth development organizations who understand how to activate and mobilize youth participation
- It has relationships with leading Canadian technology companies including social technology and app development providers.

Accomplishments and Experience

The Conservatory has been exploring the potential of digital engagement and prototyping a variety of resources for the past decade. We have learned a tremendous amount about the nature of engagement that is ready for the creation of a truly Canadian platform for cultural participation. Here are some examples of what The RCM has already accomplished:

A – Early Childhood Education Smart Start App for Parents

Understanding the significant cognitive benefits of arts-based learning, we are in the process of developing an App (to be launched next year) for use by parents of young children.

Combining The Conservatory's internationally recognized teaching methods with the latest in cognitive science, it is designed to guide parents through simple activities crafted to captivate and connect the parent and child while stimulating early development in language, spatial reasoning and emotional intelligence.

The App will be based upon three years of research conducted by Dr. Sean Hutchins, the Conservatory's staff neuroscientist and Dr. Laurel Trainor, who is a specialist in infant brain research and director of the McMaster Institute for Music & the Mind. Dr. Hutchins and Dr. Trainor have been working with the RCM's Smart Start program, conducting primary research to assess the socio-emotional and perceptual benefits of the Smart Start classes. Infants participating in the study were given age-appropriate tests designed to examine basic perceptual and socio-emotional skills, including a tonality preference test, a joint attention task, a helpfulness task, and an electrophysiological measurement.

B – Understanding the structure of sound

The RCM has always stressed listening skills and the development of the capacity to understand chords and structures that make up music. But teachers have always struggled to get students to invest time in ear training.

In 2015 the RCM launched 12 levels of online ear training exercises that would be so compelling for students that they would themselves choose to spend time on the activities.

The key was convincing youth that this kind of training is both fun and tremendously useful. With good ear training skills, a student can hear a pop tune on their mobile phone and then sit down and pick it out at the instrument. Understanding that outcome has turned out to be a big selling point.

Today more than 8,000 students from across the country are regularly logging hours building great ear training skills online. And that is without any real investment in promotion.

C – Collisions of ideas and challenges lead to profound engagement

The RCM curriculum consists of a beautifully curated overview of the collisions and exchanges of ideas that drove culture forward over the past few centuries as musicians explored the potential of new technologies and social ideas.

This process of exchange of ideas is key to engagement of young people. This past Fall, the RCM prototyped a unique Challenge event in Calgary where teams of high school and university students collaborated to address gaps in their learning and society, using today's tools of cultural engagement and communication, such as apps.

The industry experts who attended the closing pitches were astounded by the high level of creative insight and thinking, and the extraordinary collaboration among the teams. The youth were inspired to do their best work by encountering a collision of ideas shared by experts in design, digital media arts, app development, business, and culture.

One student tweeted that they had “learned more about engagement in two hours at the RCM Challenge event” than they would ever have learned in class.

The Conservatory’s takeaway is that we need to bring diverse points of view and expertise to any cultural experience. To get there, we are developing partnerships with a wide range of cultural and learning organizations, technology providers, and designers and creatives of the first order.

We aim to offer Canadian youth access to the tremendous diversity of Canadian music and cultural experiences. They will be able to pursue the linkages in today’s culture between musicians and film makers, artists and app designers, digital storytelling and communication. And they will be encouraged to connect their cultural experiences to social issues that matter to them.

D – Deconstructing and reconstructing great art leads to deeper understanding and creative growth

The Conservatory has experimented with the creation of digital music mixing and composing tools as a way to foster greater understanding of music since 2005.

One key learning came about as a result of an app project where youth were exposed to seven foundational works of music for piano, ranging from Fur Elise to a Chopin Nocturne. The technology deconstructed each piece into chords, motifs, and pitches that users could reassemble to create their own take on the music.

A teenager who was one of the first to try it out used the Chopin resources to ‘play’ the theme from a hugely popular Zombie video game. It turned out that the composer of the video game score had done exactly what the app was intended to make possible: he had recomposed the Chopin piece to create a haunting, romantic melody.

Conclusion: A Profound Impact on Canadian Culture

An investment in inclusive digital Canadian cultural infrastructure will enhance opportunities for all Canadians to gain exposure to the beauty of music as an art form as well as the creative thinking and collaborative skills to succeed in the innovation economy, no matter where they live, no matter what their cultural or socioeconomic background.

Our cultural and creative industries truly are a vibrant part of our economy and our national identity and an investment by the Government of Canada will strengthen Canada’s cultural capacity and provide support for communities of all sizes and cultures to join in shaping the future of cultural engagement. Additionally it will create dozens of highly skilled positions for platform designers, builders, and maintainers, as well as for content creators both within the Conservatory and across the Canadian cultural landscape.

Furthermore the benefits of an investment in digital Canadian cultural infrastructure will not be bound to Canada's borders but will also help define Canada to the world. The Royal Conservatory of Music is well positioned to reach a global audience and to develop a new generation of internationally acclaimed musicians. Culture can and should be reinstated as part of Canada's foreign diplomacy and an investment in RCM will go a long way towards boosting our international profile and promoting Canadian culture and creativity on the world stage.

By partnering with the Royal Conservatory of Music, the Government of Canada can deliver on its commitment to reinvest in Canada's cultural and creative industries and grow the economy. An investment of \$12.5 million, over a five year period, to enable the realization of this important initiative will truly strengthen our rich Canadian identity.