

FUTURESTOPS

Reimagining the 21st Century Organ Experience

Over the past several years, the Royal Canadian College of Organists, supported by a grant from the Canada Council's Digital Strategy Fund, has created and produced FutureStops, a multi-faceted project designed to revitalize the organ for the 21st century by exploring and celebrating a wide range of contemporary approaches to the organ, by building a community of contemporary organ enthusiasts who value artistic innovation, diversity and community engagement as keys to the 21st century organ experience, and by proactively cultivating newer, younger and more diverse audiences for contemporary organ music.

FutureStops has taken shape as a podcast (37 episodes) featuring many of the world's most innovative organists, an interactive Canadian organ map, as well as an online community hub, and a hybrid in-person/livestreamed festival held in Toronto in September 2022. To conclude this first major phase of FutureStops, and in fulfillment of our responsibilities to the Canada Council, we are sharing our key learnings from this intensive project with members of the Canadian arts community.

FutureStops advanced appreciation for an interest in contemporary organ music in Canada

FutureStops has placed an emphasis on showcasing Canadian talent alongside the best in international creative leaders working with the organ. We discovered that Canadians make up a huge proportion of the energetic new talents making inroads with new audiences on this instrument, be it through their compositions, performances, or other forms of advocacy and representation such as filmmaking about the organ or occupying a prestigious post in a historical international landmark for the organ. Canadians around the world are bringing a unique perspective to this instrument, and audiences are taking notice; among our featured Canadian artists are some of the best-selling performers and recording artists on the organ. FutureStops has



PHOTO: Green Yang

helped to highlight the reality that Canadian perspectives and approaches to this instrument represent some of the best and most sustainable manifestations of its future, with open minded and curious approaches which span the entire range of ideas about how to keep this instrument relevant in social, technological, cultural and academic terms.

The FutureStops project connected young and diverse audiences to contemporary organ music

It was clear from observing participants in the FutureStops Podcast, Online Community Hub and Festival events that the FutureStops project succeeded in attracting and engaging a new, young and culturally diverse audience to 21st century organ music in Canada. Audiences leaving concert performances were thrilled with the experience. An audience survey following the launch of the project at the Festival revealed that:

- Close to **50%** of audience had never attended an organ concert before
- **92%** said that they would attend an organ concert in the future
- **52%** said that their perception of the organ changed as a result of FutureStops

- **50%** said that they might or would join the FutureStops Online Community
- Average rating for concert enjoyment was **9 out of 10**
- **78%** were optimistic about the future of the organ and its music

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What we learned from the FutureStops initiative

We learned that building support for an initiative takes time, because communication is a complex art which requires multiple iterations in different forms for the successful grasping of our message by our target audience. We needed supporters from many different areas to achieve our goal to connect young and diverse audiences to contemporary organ music. We needed academic institutions, religious institutions, music promoters in multiple genres, music media in multiple genres, mainstream media, cultural leaders and many others to understand what we were trying to do, and to be excited about it, and want to communicate this to their communities. This takes an incredible amount of time and energy. Potential partners need to see our commitment, the effects of our efforts, and be inspired by these, to give their own time and resources to supporting our project. We still don't know the full extent of how our efforts have influenced the community and improved the landscape for contemporary organ music in Canada and internationally. But all of the feedback we have received indicates that the fundamentals of this project resonated deeply with everyone we were able to reach.

“The Festival's broad and spacious programming introduced me to artists and approaches to organ performance that I was previously unaware of, in addition to programming some of my favourite composers and performers. This led to further music discovery after the Festival after I read and researched more about the new artists I enjoyed. Ultimately, I learned that there is a much larger audience for organ music which directly led to me pursuing organ music projects of my own.”

— FUTURESTOPS COMMUNITY MEMBER

The FutureStops project took on the ambitious challenge of devising and implementing catalytic strategies to reinvigorate contemporary organ culture for 21st century audiences. From the outset we understood that these strategies needed to be hybrid, bridging the site-specific physical world where organs live and breathe, with virtual channels where today's audiences meet, learn and engage to create dynamic communities of interest. Our efforts to date—37 episodes of the FutureStops podcast, an in-person and livestreamed contemporary organ festival, and the launch of an online community hub for contemporary organ enthusiasts, have proven highly fruitful. And yet to achieve our larger ambitions they must be only a beginning. In particular we need partners and supporters to help us invest further in our emerging online community hub, so we can add and maintain international organ databases, concert calendars and other tools like ecommerce to establish our site as the go to destination for organ recordings and compositions.



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