

## The Canadian Renaissance Music Summer Schools

Greg Skidmore, Artistic Director  
Peter Phillips, Patron

### CRMSS Pacific 2024 Report

#### A week of Renaissance Polyphony

That's right. A whole week!! CRMSS Pacific 2024 built on the success of our first "trial" weekend course in the Vancouver area in 2023 by growing in length to equal the more established CRMSS Ontario courses. We welcomed participants from all around the region and further afield as well, including a group from Victoria and some very intrepid travellers from the US: California, Idaho, Kansas, and even New York State were represented.

We met on the afternoon of **Sunday, August 4th 2024** and ran headlong into seven full days of non-stop Renaissance music, finishing with our final public concert on **Sunday, August 11th 2024**. We were again graciously hosted by **St Helen's Parish** in the Burnaby Heights area of the Lower Mainland.

By expanding CRMSS Pacific 2024 to be a full week in length, we were able to accomplish a very important part of our mission to become a truly national organization. It's rewarding to see the enthusiasm all across Canada for Renaissance music and as we lay down roots in the Vancouver area, it's exciting to think of how this may continue to grow.



#### A very special Guest Artist

Aside from the opportunity to make Renaissance music exclusively for an entire week, it is the staff on a CRMSS course that set it apart. CRMSS regulars **Greg Skidmore** (a Canadian baritone and conductor now living in the UK, who is also Founder and Artistic Director of the CRMSS organization as a whole), **Lucas Harris**, and **Sharang Sharma** (both from Toronto) were joined by new and returning staff members from the Vancouver area: **Sarah Poon** led a Viol Weekend and **Christina Hutten** of UBC arranged Keyboard Day. (You can read more about these two mini-courses below.)



It was an extraordinary privilege also to welcome as our Guest Artist at CRMSS Pacific 2024 **Julian Gregory**, who currently sings tenor in **The King's Singers**. This ensemble needs no introduction, and has travelled the world for decades delighting audiences with stellar performances of a range of repertoire. Julian brought world-class knowledge of small ensemble singing, a unique perspective on Renaissance music in particular, and huge quantities of warmth, enthusiasm, good humour - and a willingness to help out move chairs too! We were honoured to have someone of such a high calibre with us.



## Viva Italia!

In a change from our weekend course in 2023, where we explored a wide range of Renaissance music, at CRMSS Pacific 2024 there was a definite repertoire theme: *La Bella Italia: Music from the birthplace of the Renaissance*. As Italy was such an important place in the European Renaissance, it meant we could not only sing music written by Italian composers (such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Claudio Monteverdi, Andrea Gabrieli, among many others), but also those traveling composers who made Italy their home at some point in their career: Cipriano de Rore, Orlande de Lassus, Francisco Guerrero, Tomás Luis de Victoria, and others. As always, we sang secular and sacred repertoire, with a special focus on Palestrina's motets from his *Canticum canticorum* (Song of Songs) publication as well as madrigals by Sigismondo D'India.





## Singers and players together

Since the very beginning, at every CRMSS course, we have provided opportunities for instrumentalists to join the singers and explore Renaissance music written for their often strange and wonderful instruments! At CRMSS Pacific 2024 these efforts truly blossomed. We were overjoyed to work with two musicians based in the Vancouver area, **Christina Hutten** and **Sarah Poon** in bringing a real instrumental flavour to the week. **Lucas Harris** was of course also 'instrumental' to our efforts here.

Making use of all of this luxurious talent and expertise, we were able to run *three* "mini-courses" for instrumentalists during CRMSS Pacific 2024: **Keyboard Day**, **Lute & Elizabeth Broken Consort Day**, and **Viol Weekend!**

Christina, an organist specializing in Renaissance keyboard performance practice, arranged for a day of activities for organists and harpsichord players in which many of the best instruments from the area were brought together for participants to play. They met on the morning of **Tuesday, August 6th** at **West Vancouver United Church** to play the unique mechanical-action organ there. After lunch, they joined the rest of the course at **St. Helen's Parish** to try out other fascinating instruments that were brought together specifically for this course.



The following day, **Wednesday, August 7th**, it was **Lute & Elizabethan Broken Consort Day**. Lucas collaborated with a group of Victoria-based Renaissance instrument enthusiasts as well as others from the region to enjoy the unique opportunity to play in an Elizabethan Broken Consort - a specific ensemble made up of lute, cittern, bandora, treble and bass viol, and transverse flute. This was a popular combination of instruments during the Renaissance with a fascinating ensemble sound. Quite a few other lutenists joined in and the resulting band was a wonder to behold!



As a very special treat, **Ray Nurse**, one of North America's true Early Music pioneers and a man to whom so much is owed by Renaissance music lovers everywhere, was able to join Lucas and the instrumentalists on this day. He introduced us to some of the work he's been doing recently in preparing unknown scores for Broken Consort in Italy and elsewhere.

And last but definitely not least, from **Friday, August 9th** to **Sunday, August 11th** we were joined by a group of seventeen(!) viola da gamba players for **Viol Weekend**. Sarah led these players through a series of workshops and sessions dedicated to this wonderful instrument. Sarah was joined by **Tess Roberts** from Seattle, who is currently studying the viola da gamba at the Royal Academy of Music in London, England, who helped lead the weekend's activities. There were some sessions in which singers and viol players were able to make music together, in an ad hoc reading session that took place on the first evening of the weekend.



### Viola da Gamba "Petting Zoo"

In a very exciting and special treat for all of the singers involved in CRMSS Pacific 2024, **Sarah Poon** and some friends of hers brought *close to two dozen* violas of all conceivable shapes and sizes to St. Helen's Parish on **Thursday, August 8th** and ran a "**Viola da Gamba Petting Zoo**" for the rest of the singing participants on that day. This meant that, in small

groups of 4 or 5, all of the singers had a chance to duck out of their other rehearsals and actually pick up and play a viola da gama, with no previous experience required. Sarah was endlessly patient and helpful and the singers appreciated this truly unique opportunity.





## Performances and recitals to enjoy...

Throughout the week, there were recitals and performances given for the participants to listen to, most not open to the public. This offered opportunities for our staff members and guests to display their considerable talents and gave the participants a bit of a breather in a very busy week.

On **Monday, August 5th**, we were extremely fortunate to welcome **Capella Borealis**, a group of professional brass players based in the Vancouver area, to St. Helen's Parish to perform music written for and tell us about the Renaissance ancestor of the trombone, the sackbutt. During this engaging lecture recital, we were introduced to this family of instruments and had a chance to hear them working as a consort with some singers, a very common occurrence during the Renaissance. Vocal staff members Greg, Julian, and Sharang were the vocalist "guinea pigs" on this occasion, as they worked with Capella Borealis in an "open rehearsal" format on a piece none of them had seen before. It was wonderful to meet the members of this ensemble (Jeremy Berkman, Ellen Marple, and Nathan Wilkes) and see their beautiful instruments in action.



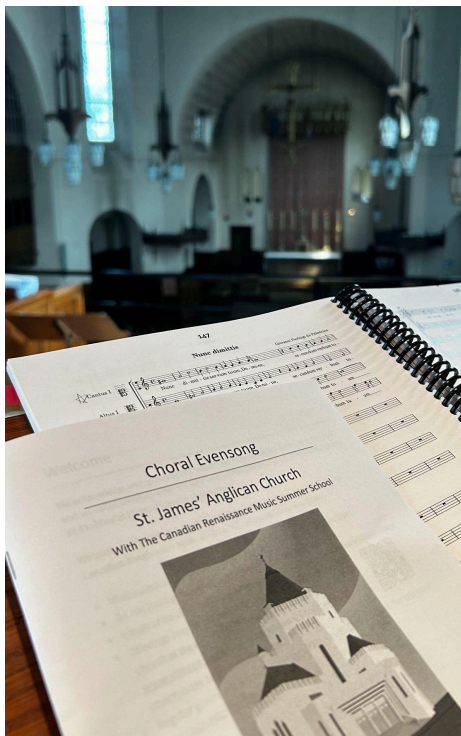
On **Wednesday, August 7th**, the participants of **Lute & Elizabethan Broken Consort Day** gave the singers an informal recital performance at the end of their day, allowing the lutenists and other instrumentalists an opportunity to show off what they'd been up to. The singers were all incredibly impressed at the array of hardware on display!

On each CRMSS course, there is a more formal (but still private and only open to participants) **Staff Recital**. At CRMSS Pacific 2024 this took place on the morning of **Friday, August 9th**. Julian, Greg, and Sharang sang as soloists and in various combinations, while Lucas and Christina both accompanied and played solo pieces in a varied programme of Italian Renaissance music starting from the late 15th century and ending with Monteverdi's high-octane trio *Duo seraphim*, from his 1610 Vespers.

## ... and to take part in!

Performing opportunities are right at the core of every CRMSS course. Participants come together to learn about the music and its context, but this is all done in the context of preparing for public performances. At CRMSS Pacific 2024, there were four main opportunities for the singing participants to perform.

However, half way between a private and public "performance", every day of a CRMSS course ends with a church service of sung **Compline**. This ancient monastic service contains a lot of Gregorian plainsong and is calm and contemplative, designed to mark the end of the day. While not compulsory, all the singers (and the instrumentalists too!) were encouraged to take part each day in this service and over the course of the week it became a very special moment for the course to come together as a whole.



On **Friday, August 9th** all the singing participants (and a few of the participants of Keyboard Day) hopped on the bus and went to **St. James Anglican Church** in Vancouver to sing a service of **Choral Evensong** in the English Cathedral tradition. In keeping with our Italian repertoire theme we sang music by Costanza Festa, Luca Marenzio, Giovanni Palestrina, and Andrea Gabrieli in the lavish acoustic of this very special church.

While most of the performances the participants prepare for are open to the public, there is a more informal opportunity toward the end of the week for anyone to perform anything they'd like in what we call the **Sharing Concert**. This is the opportunity for all of the various ensembles that form over the week to perform for one another, as well as soloists and other ad hoc groups that form. At CRMSS Pacific 2024, this concert took place on our last evening together, **Saturday, August 10th**, at St. Helen's Parish and some food and drink was provided (pizza, beer, wine, juice, etc, and a huge quantity of things to dip into other things...) and the evening drew on until it became a party. At this event we were treated to a wide range of acts, including many soloists who had worked with Lucas, Julian, and Sharang over the course of

the week; being led through some ridiculously complicated rounds by two of the participants; and one other participant accompanying herself on the viola da gamba while singing Tallis' Canon.





On the morning of **Sunday, August 11th**, we provided choral music at High Mass for the congregation of **St. Helen's Parish**, our hosts. This included a Palestrina mass setting and some motets. It was important to see how the music we were preparing fit into a liturgical context, and give back in a small but important way to the church community who were so gracious in allowing us to use their facilities.



The main goal of every CRMSS course is a public concert held on the last day. This marks the end of the course and is open to the public, who purchase tickets to attend. This concert showcases all of the different sorts of music that gets made during the course of the week. In the afternoon on **Sunday, August 11th**, we held a concert at St. Helen's Parish that included music by many of the composers already mentioned here and more: Phillipe Verdelot, Francesca Caccini, Giovanni Battista Bassani, Giacomo Gorzanis, Giovanni Maria Rosso, and others. As Viol Weekend was still in full swing, the viola da gamba players supplied a set of music as well as part of the concert. This event is always bittersweet: it's the culmination of a week's hard work and an opportunity to show what we've accomplished, but it's also the last chance we have to make music together after a week of intensive rehearsals and sessions. This concert didn't disappoint, and some very special music was made.

## **Both sacred and secular music, as well as solo singing**

Throughout CRMSS Ontario 2024, the singers were placed in differently sized ensembles. Rehearsing in these different groups gave the week its structure. All of the singers began each day in a **Tutti** ensemble numbering 67 participants. There were two **Chamber Choirs**, each made up of half this number, and every participant was put into two different **Small Groups** by Greg before the course began to rehearse primarily secular music. Finally, for those who wished, there were opportunities throughout the week to concentrate on **solo singing** over and above the individual singing lesson all participants received. The soloists had coachings with Julian and Sharang and were accompanied by Lucas.



## Digging into the academic context

On top of all of this rehearsing and performing, there were sessions in the schedule where the staff and participants could explore theoretical and academic aspects of Renaissance music. At CRMSS Pacific 2024, because of the large amount of instrumental activity, many of these lectures included a performing or demonstration aspect as well.

On **Tuesday, August 6th**, on top of her duties with the keyboard players, **Christina Hutten** gave a fascinating talk about Renaissance organs in general and Italian instruments in particular. This included technical details about how the instruments worked, some historical context for their development, and fascinating recordings of some magnificent instruments. Christina also played live for us during this presentation.



Given that our Guest Artist **Julian Gregory** was both an expert in small-ensemble singing on an international level but also the product of the revered English Cathedral and Chapel Choir tradition, it seemed too much of an opportunity to miss not to sit him down and grill him a bit! Greg and Julian led a **Fireside Chat** on **Wednesday, August 7th** during which they discussed his particular journey through education and into **The King's Singers**, the audition process for the group, what it's like joining a group like that for the first few concerts, what life is like on the road, and many other topics besides. We learned that Renaissance polyphony, and its fundamental character as being vocal chamber music, in fact informs the way The King's Singers approach all of their repertoire, where skills learned in Palestrina and Tallis are very much applied to singing Ligeti, folk songs, and Beatles arrangements! It was a rare, candid, and fascinating discussion and we are so grateful to Julian for being willing to lift the curtain a little.

**Sarah Poon** gave an "Introduction to the Viola da Gamba" lecture to the singers on **Thursday, August 8th** and this included some spellbinding performances by both Sarah and **Tess Roberts**.





## Looking ahead

CRMSS Pacific 2024 exceeded all expectations. The amount of instrumental involvement alone was such a treat and brought some real variety to the week. Everyone, staff included, discovered so much about this music they didn't know before, and the sense of wonder and enthusiasm for this unique heritage and old - but certainly not irrelevant - beauty was palpable throughout

our time together. Many passionate and stellar performances resulted from all of our hard work, and friendships were made and nourished. Any CRMSS course is led by one driving force: the *joy* of this amazing music. We are privileged to be able to come together and devote ourselves to these works of astonishing beauty and it is so exciting to think of all there is left to discover.

**“The course was wonderful. Like suddenly growing wings and flying from the edge of a cliff to soar over an incredibly beautiful landscape. Thrilling, terrifying, fulfilling, unexpected, very meaningful. After landing, it’s good to rest on Terra firma as we catch our breath, and laugh and cry as we recover from the adrenaline rush..... And then plan the next flight!”**

- Natalie, soprano

**“Thank you again for an amazing week at CRMSS! The quality of instruction, leadership, knowledge, repertoire, faculty, and facility was top notch. It was such a joy to be immersed in this music of which I can't get enough!”**

- Catherine, soprano

**CRMSS Pacific 2025** will run from **Sunday, August 10th** to **Sunday, August 17th**. It will again take place at **St. Helen's Parish** in **Burnaby, BC**. Our staff team will include Greg, Lucas, Christina, and Sharang and we will be joined in 2026 by **Matt Long** from the UK, a member with Greg of the vocal ensemble **I Fagiolini** as well as a busy soloist throughout Europe, and **Dr. Kate Helsen**, CRMSS' Academic Lead and a member of the **Tafelmusik Baroque Chamber Choir**. Rounding out our team will be a group of master's level vocal students from the UK studying with Robert Hollingworth at the University of York on the "Solo Voice Ensemble Singing" programme there who will be **CRMSS International Scholars** at the course. Some details of the week are still being worked out, but we encourage anyone interesting in applying to visit our website ([crmss.org](http://crmss.org)) or get in touch directly with Greg using [info@crmss.org](mailto:info@crmss.org)

As we solidify the amazing start we've had in the Vancouver area with another week-long course, and expand again this year in the Maritimes with our "CRMSS Atlantic 2025" event, The Canadian Renaissance Music Summer Schools organization is committed to continuing to provide opportunities for all Canadians to experience this astonishingly beautiful music. We know how wonderful this music is and we know it must be shared. Join us,