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Toronto, ON - The Canadian Opera Company is deeply saddened to learn of the sudden passing of former general director Lotfi Mansouri, who guided the company from 1976 to 1988.

“Lotfi Mansouri was a legend. There is no question he was one of opera’s most influential general directors; whether it be his passion for promoting young performers, his zeal for attracting new audiences to the art form, or his undeniable love of opera and all its idiosyncrasies,” says COC General Director Alexander Neef. “The international prestige that this company now enjoys is due in no small part to his strong leadership and tireless efforts. I am personally very grateful for his friendship and the advice he shared with me ever since I joined the COC.”

Mansouri was the COC’s third general director and played a significant role in launching the COC’s international reputation for artistic excellence and creative innovation, and growing the company into the largest producer of opera in Canada and one of the largest in North America. During his tenure, Mansouri’s focus was on implementing a longer performance season, audience development, more adventurous repertoire and productions, and advance planning both financially and artistically, the accomplishments of which are essential elements of the COC’s operations today.

The COC’s international reputation was most certainly launched with the growing number of singers of world-renown that Mansouri was able to attract to the company with greater regularity. Mansouri brought with him to the COC an extensive network of friends and associates developed during his time as a resident stage director at Zurich Opera and Geneva Opera, as well as guest director at major opera houses in Italy and the United States. Not long into his term the COC presented what has been called an unprecedented season with preeminent opera stars of the day Joan Sutherland, Tatiana Troyanos, Elisabeth Söderström and James McCracken all appearing in the 1980 – 1981 performance year.

Mansouri is also credited with establishing the COC Orchestra and COC Chorus, which have become two of the company’s most distinguished attributes. The company’s orchestra and chorus are internationally acclaimed for the skill and musicianship possessed by their artists.

A great ambition of Mansouri’s was the creation of a specialized training program for young opera artists that would serve as a bridge to professional life. This goal was realized in 1980 with the launch of the COC Ensemble Studio, which has become Canada’s premier training program for young opera professionals. To date, over 180 young professional Canadian singers, opera coaches, stage directors and conductors have acquired their first major professional operatic experience through the Ensemble Studio, claiming such alumni as Ben Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, Joseph Kaiser, David Pomeroy, Lauren Segal and Krisztina Szabó.

It was also during Mansouri’s time as general director that the COC established permanent administrative offices at the Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Opera Centre and its own production shop, an essential requirement of any major opera company.

Under Mansouri’s tenure, one of the greatest contributions to the COC and the opera world was the creation of SURTITLES™, which were unveiled at the company’s 1983 production of *Elektra*. The occasion marked the very first time any opera house in the world had projected a simultaneous translation of the opera for its audience, and the advent of SURTITLES™ allowed the COC to make opera more accessible to audiences. The idea of titles, once revolutionary to the international opera community, is now accepted practice in all major opera houses worldwide.

Mansouri left the COC in 1988 to become general director of San Francisco Opera. He returned on multiple occasions to give masterclasses to the young opera professionals of the Ensemble Studio and to direct on the company’s mainstage.