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## **COC NAMES WINNERS OF ENSEMBLE STUDIO COMPETITION GALA, *CENTRE STAGE*: QUEBEC'S KARINE BOUCHER WINS TOP PRIZE AND AUDIENCE CHOICE AWARD**

### **Vocal Showcase Featured Surprise Performance by International Star Rufus Wainwright**

Toronto – Soprano **Karine Boucher** from Quebec City took home first prize and the Audience Choice Award at the **Canadian Opera Company's third annual Ensemble Studio Competition** on November 26, 2013, at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. The competition is the feature event of the COC's inaugural Ensemble Studio Competition Gala, *Centre Stage*, an evening dedicated to the discovery and celebration of the next generation of opera stars. **Boucher** was selected from nine finalists to receive the **\$5,000** first prize award. Tenor **Jean-Philippe Fortier-Lazure** from Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, won the second prize of **\$3,000**, and bass-baritone **Iain MacNeil** from Brockville, Ontario, was awarded the third prize of **\$1,500**. In addition, **Boucher** took home the Audience Choice Award worth **\$1,500**.

*Centre Stage* host **Rufus Wainwright** also treated the audience to a surprise musical performance as part of the evening's festivities, accompanied by the internationally acclaimed COC Orchestra conducted by COC Music Director Johannes Debus. As the judges deliberated the winners of the competitive vocal showcase, the Grammy-nominated and multi-Juno Award winner, whose own singular sound has transcended the worlds of rock, opera, theatre, dance and film, delighted *Centre Stage* patrons with "That's Entertainment" by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz, "Les Feux d'Artifices" from Wainwright's opera *Prima Donna*, and "Oh, What a World" from his third album *Want One*.

"I'm proud to say that last night's first-ever *Centre Stage* was a great success. It generated vital support for the COC's Ensemble Studio and was a wonderful showcase of the incredible musical talent we have in this country. It was an amazing night – from the gifted young singers who competed, accompanied by the musical artistry of Johannes and our acclaimed orchestra, to the generosity of our extraordinary host, Rufus Wainwright, who surprised our audience with a performance," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "I applaud all the young artists we heard in the competition. They performed with great passion and commitment, and the quality of the emerging talent we heard made us all very enthusiastic about the future of opera in Canada."

The nine finalists from across the country were selected from 155 singers heard in preliminary auditions in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and New York. They were generously outfitted by **Hudson's Bay Queen Street Store** for their onstage role at *Centre Stage*, as part of an initiative to help prepare the artists for their professional opera careers.

On November 26, the adjudication panel heard each finalist perform two arias accompanied by the COC Orchestra conducted by Debus: the first was before a private audience of select COC patrons and the second was before the larger *Centre Stage* audience of 800 patrons. The adjudication panel was comprised of COC General Director **Alexander Neef**, COC Artistic Administrator **Roberto Mauro**, COC Music Administrator **Sandra Gavinchuk**, Head of the COC Ensemble Studio **Liz Upchurch**, and Canadian soprano, singing teacher and COC Ensemble Studio alumna **Wendy Nielsen**.

In addition to competing for the four cash prizes, the finalists are also hoping to secure a highly coveted position in the **2014/2015 COC Ensemble Studio**, Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals. The 2013 competition is a showcase of the opera talent the COC has scouted from across the country on its national audition tour and features those artists from the final round of auditions for the prestigious program.

COC artistic staff will confirm the lineup of the 14/15 Ensemble Studio over the next few weeks. The 14/15 Ensemble Studio members will be joining an illustrious program that, since its inception in 1980, has launched the careers of over 180 young professional Canadian singers, opera coaches, stage directors and conductors, including Ben Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, Joseph Kaiser, David Pomeroy, Allyson McHardy, Lauren Segal and Krisztina Szabó.

During the pre-competition cocktail reception, **Centre Stage** guests enjoyed a sumptuous charcuterie spread by **Cheese Boutique** and a selection of wines from **Trius Wines**. Following the competition, 280 **Centre Stage** Gala Dinner guests went on to enjoy an elegant formal dinner from the privileged vantage point of the Four Seasons Centre stage, where they mingled with competition finalists and winners, notable COC artists, **Centre Stage** host **Rufus Wainwright** and **Centre Stage** co-chairs **Trinity Jackman** and **Jonathan Bloomberg**. The uniqueness of the gala evening was further highlighted by the rare opportunity to enjoy the gastronomic talents of critically acclaimed **Nota Bene Executive Chef David Lee**.

**Centre Stage** on November 26 marked the inauguration of the COC's fundraising gala. Proceeds from the evening were raised in support of the COC and will go towards the company's Ensemble Studio.

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## ABOUT THE WINNERS

### **KARINE BOUCHER, Soprano , First Prize (\$5,000) and Audience Choice Award, (\$1,500)**

Arias performed: "Glück das mir verblieb" (*Die tote Stadt*, Erich Wolfgang Korngold) and "E pur così in un giorno...Piangerò la sorte mia" (*Guilio Cesare*, George Frideric Handel)

Born in Québec City, Karine Boucher is a current member of the Atelier lyrique de l'Opéra de Montréal. She received her master's degree and bachelor's degree in opera performance from the Québec Conservatory. In 2011 she was a regional finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and is a grant recipient of the Jacqueline Desmarais Foundation. Credits include Annina in *La Traviata*, Inez in *Il Trovatore* and Kätchen in *Werther* (Opéra de Montréal); Miss Pinkerton in *The Old Maid and the Thief* and Micaëla in *Carmen* (Atelier lyrique); and Damon in *Acis and Galatea* (Arte Musica). In 2014, she will sing the role of Mimì in the Jeunesses Musicales tour of *La Bohème*.

### **JEAN-PHILIPPE FORTIER-LAZURE, Tenor, Second Prize (\$3,000)**

Arias performed: "Vainement ma bien aimée" (*Le roi d'Y's*, Édouard-Victoire-Antione Lalo) and "Quanto è bella" (*L'elisir d'amore*, Gaetano Donizetti)

Originally from Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, tenor Jean-Philippe Fortier-Lazure is pursuing a master's degree in classical singing at the University of Montreal, where he also completed his bachelor's degree. Mr. Fortier-Lazure has participated in young artist training programs with the National Arts Centre, Centre d'Arts Orford and Académie Internationale d'été Nice. Credits include Pelléas in *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Nova Scotia Opera Company and Atelier d'Opéra, University of Montreal); Chevalier de la Force in *Dialogues des Carmélites* (Atelier d'Opéra); Beppe in *Pagliacci* (Opera Lyra Ottawa – Silver Cast); Tamino in *Die Zauberflöte*, Don Curzio/Don Basilio in *Le nozze di Figaro* and Mr. Gobineau in *The Medium* (University of Ottawa Opera Productions); and Guard in *Manon* and Prince of Persia in *Turandot* (Opera Lyra Ottawa).

### **IAIN MACNEIL, Bass-baritone, Third Place (\$1,500)**

Arias performed: "Rivolgete a lui lo sguardo" (*Così fan tutte*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart) and "Aprite un po' quegl'occhi" (*Le nozze di Figaro*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)

A native of Brockville, Ontario, Iain MacNeil is currently completing an opera diploma at the University of Toronto and received a bachelor of music degree from Dalhousie University. Credits include Figaro in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Don Giovanni in scenes from *Don Giovanni* and Dulcamara in scenes from *L'elisir d'amore* (Centre for Opera Studies in Italy); Bobby in Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny-Songspiel*, Sweeney Todd in *Sweeney Todd*, Brewer in *Comedy on the Bridge* and Tom/John in *The Face on the Barroom Floor* (Dalhousie Opera Workshop). In 2013, he participated in the Young Singers Project at the Salzburg Festival.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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**Platinum Sponsor:** Mercedes-Benz

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**Artist Sponsors:** Earlane Collins, Ninallee Craig, OCC LASIK, Patrick Hodgson Family Foundation and an anonymous donor

**Prize Sponsors:** First Prize – Colleen Sexsmith; Second Prize – ARIAS; Third Prize – Tom C. Logan; and Audience Choice Prize – Classical 96.3 FM

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**Event Supporters:** Chair-man Mills, Cheese Boutique, ev3nts, Gatsby Valet, Hilton Toronto, KnotPR, Liliun, Nota Bene, Trius Wines and Wellington Printworks

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### **About the Ensemble Studio Competition**

The Ensemble Studio Competition features singers from the final round of auditions for the COC Ensemble Studio, Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals, competing for cash prizes ranging in value from \$1,500 – \$5,000. The competition was launched in 2011 by COC General Director Alexander Neef to showcase the opera talent the COC had scouted from across the country and create a public platform for celebrating the future of opera in Canada.

With the creation of *Centre Stage*, the COC now opens the Ensemble Studio Competition to an even larger of opera lovers and interested guests as it moves from the intimate setting of the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre at the Four Seasons Centre to R. Fraser Elliott Hall. In 2013, the competition finalists are showcased as never before as they perform with an orchestra led by a world-renowned conductor from the mainstage of the COC's opera house.

The annual Ensemble Studio audition process, open only to Canadian citizens and permanent residents, takes COC artistic staff across Canada and into the U.S. for preliminary auditions in Vancouver, Montreal, Toronto and New York, followed by a final callback audition at the COC's Joey and Toby Tanenbaum Opera Centre in Toronto. It's from this pool of singers that finalists are selected for the Ensemble Studio Competition.

### **About the COC Ensemble Studio**

The COC Ensemble Studio is Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals. Since the inception of the program in 1980, over 180 young professional Canadian singers, opera coaches, stage directors and conductors have acquired their first major professional operatic experience through the Ensemble Studio.

Former members include Ben Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, Joseph Kaiser, David Pomeroy, Alison McHardy and Krisztina Szabó.

The members of the Ensemble Studio are the COC's resident artists and important ambassadors for the company. They receive a blend of advanced study and practical experience through an individually tailored, multi-year program, involving understudying and performing mainstage roles, intensive vocal coaching, language and acting studies, and career skills development, as well as participation in masterclasses with internationally renowned opera professionals.

**The COC Ensemble Studio is underwritten in part by Peter M. Deeb and The Slight Family Foundation, and is also supported by the Government of Canada through the Department of Canadian Heritage, RBC Foundation, Hal Jackman Foundation, and other generous donors.**

**About the Canadian Opera Company**

Based in Toronto, the Canadian Opera Company is the largest producer of opera in Canada and one of the largest in North America. The COC enjoys a loyal audience support-base and one of the highest attendance and subscription rates in North America. Under its leadership team of General Director Alexander Neef and Music Director Johannes Debus, the COC is increasingly capturing the opera world's attention. The COC maintains its international reputation for artistic excellence and creative innovation by creating new productions within its diverse repertoire, collaborating with leading opera companies and festivals, and attracting the world's foremost Canadian and international artists. The COC performs in its own opera house, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, hailed internationally as one of the finest in the world. Designed by Diamond Schmitt Architects, the Four Seasons Centre opened in 2006, and is also the performance venue for The National Ballet of Canada. For more information on the Canadian Opera Company, please visit its award-winning website, [coc.ca](http://coc.ca).

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