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COC'S NATIONAL AUDITION TOUR BRINGS NINE CANADIAN SINGERS TO TORONTO FOR *CENTRE STAGE*: ENSEMBLE STUDIO COMPETITION GALA

World-renowned singer-songwriter and composer Rufus Wainwright to host magical evening dedicated to the discovery and celebration of the next generation of opera stars

Toronto – Out of a pool of 155 young, aspiring opera singers from across the country, the Canadian Opera Company has selected nine to compete in the third annual **COC Ensemble Studio Competition** on **November 26, 2013** at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. The **Ensemble Studio Competition** is the feature event at the COC's first annual fundraising gala, *Centre Stage*, an evening dedicated to the discovery and celebration of the next generation of opera stars. Tickets are \$100 to this competitive vocal showcase with the nine singers selected from nationwide auditions for the COC Ensemble Studio, Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals, vying for cash prizes ranging in value from \$1,500 to \$5,000.

Hosting *Centre Stage* is Grammy-nominated and multi-Juno Award winner **Rufus Wainwright**, whose own singular sound has transcended the worlds of rock, opera, theatre, dance and film, and led him to be hailed by Elton John as "the greatest songwriter on the planet." With **Wainwright** at the helm of the evening's festivities, *Centre Stage* is further cemented as an event unlike any other in Canada for its inaugural unveiling.

With the creation of *Centre Stage*, for the first time the **Ensemble Studio Competition** will now take place on the mainstage of the Four Seasons Centre with the full force of the internationally acclaimed **COC Orchestra** conducted by **COC Music Director Johannes Debus**. The festivities culminate in an announcement of the competition's winners and an exclusive gala dinner on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre.

The young singers featured in the 2013 vocal competition are: soprano **Karine Boucher** (Quebec City, QC); mezzo-soprano **Emma Char** (Kitchener, Ont.); mezzo-soprano **Francesca Corrado** (Vancouver, B.C.); tenor **Jean-Philippe Fortier-Lazure** (Kitchener, Ont.); bass-baritone **Nathan Keoughan** (Charlottetown, P.E.I.); bass-baritone **Iain MacNeil** (Brockville, Ont.); tenor **Jean-Michel Richer** (Montreal, QC); soprano **Lara Secord-Haid** (Winnipeg, Man.); and mezzo-soprano **Rachel Wood** (London, Ont.).

The nine finalists were chosen following preliminary auditions in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and New York City. As part of the **Ensemble Studio Competition** on November 26, each finalist will perform an aria showcasing their vocal technique and range before an audience and panel of judges. First, second and third prizes, worth \$5,000, \$3,000 and \$1,500, respectively, will be awarded, in addition to an Audience Choice Award, selected by audience vote, worth \$1,500. Select finalists will also be invited to join the COC's 2014/2015 Ensemble Studio, to be announced at a later date.

"*Centre Stage* is a must-see event for everyone who cares about the future of opera in Canada. We are honoured to have Rufus Wainwright hosting the inaugural gala. He's one of the most prolific songwriters and male vocalists of his generation, and the perfect person to introduce the rising opera talent who will be taking to the stage for the vocal competition," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "The evolution of our Ensemble Studio Competition over the last three years, to now be taking place on the mainstage of our opera house with the COC

Orchestra and Johannes Debus, makes *Centre Stage* a very special way to experience the incredible opera talent we have in this country.”

COC General Director **Alexander Neef** heads the jury for the third annual Ensemble Studio Competition at *Centre Stage*. He is joined by COC Artistic Administrator **Roberto Mauro**, COC Music Administrator **Sandra Gavinchuk**, Head of the COC Ensemble Studio **Liz Upchurch**, and Canadian soprano, singing teacher and Ensemble Studio alumna **Wendy Nielsen**. The judging panel will deliberate on location and announce the competition winners at the event’s conclusion.

The **Ensemble Studio Competition** highlights the finest young opera talent from across Canada. In addition to winning one of the event’s cash prizes, earning a place in the COC’s Ensemble Studio can be these singers’ first step towards an international opera career. The audience at the **Ensemble Studio Competition** will be hearing the singers selected to follow in the footsteps of such renowned Ensemble Studio graduates Ben Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, David Pomeroy, Joseph Kaiser, Allyson McHardy, Lauren Segal and Krisztina Szabó.

The **Ensemble Studio Competition** at *Centre Stage* takes place at **6:30 p.m.** in R. Fraser Elliott Hall at the Four Seasons Centre (145 Queen St. W.). Tickets are \$100 and all patrons who attend the **Ensemble Studio Competition** as part of *Centre Stage* will enjoy a pre-competition cocktail celebration in the Four Seasons Centre’s sparkling Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room.

Following the competition, *Centre Stage* Gala Dinner guests go on to enjoy an elegant formal dinner from the privileged vantage point of the Four Seasons Centre stage, where they’ll mingle with competition finalists and winners, notable COC artists and *Centre Stage* co-chairs Trinity Jackman and Jonathan Bloomberg. The uniqueness of the gala evening is further highlighted by the rare opportunity to enjoy the gastronomic talents of critically acclaimed Nota Bene Executive Chef David Lee. *Centre Stage Gala* tickets, encompassing the vocal competition and an exclusive black-tie dinner, are \$1,500 with a limited number still available for purchase.

For more information and to purchase tickets, visit COCCentrestage.ca, call COC Ticket Services at **416-363-8231** or go in-person to the Four Seasons Centre Box Office (145 Queen St. W.).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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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 audience of over 1,000 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, Lauren Segal 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.

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