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SEVEN CANADIAN SINGERS TAKE *CENTRE STAGE* IN COC VOCAL SHOWCASE COMPETITION

Toronto – Out of a pool of 175 aspiring opera singers from across the country, the **Canadian Opera Company** has selected **seven** to compete at *Centre Stage: Ensemble Studio Competition Gala* on **November 25, 2014** at Toronto's **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts**. This year hosted by world renowned Canadian tenor **Ben Heppner**, *Centre Stage* is the COC's annual fundraising gala dedicated to the discovery and celebration of the next generation of opera stars. The **Ensemble Studio Competition** is the gala's feature event and an exhilarating vocal showcase with the 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.

The young singers featured in the 2014 vocal competition are: mezzo-soprano **Zoe Band** (Toronto); soprano **Eliza Johnson** (Stratford, Ont.); baritone **Dimitri Katotakis** (Toronto); baritone **Nathan Keoughan** (Charlottetown); tenor **Aaron Sheppard** (St. John's, N.L.); mezzo-soprano **Michelle Siemens** (Calgary); and tenor **Charles Sy** (Toronto).

This year's seven finalists were chosen following preliminary auditions in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and New York City. At *Centre Stage* on **November 25**, each finalist will give a performance 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, are awarded, in addition to an Audience Choice Award, selected by audience vote, worth \$1,500. Select finalists are also invited to join the COC's 2015/2016 Ensemble Studio, to be announced at a later date.

"Through *Centre Stage*, the Canadian Opera Company is able to offer a special preview of the future of opera in Canada. The young artists we invite to participate in *Centre Stage* are some of the best and most promising operatic voices from across the country," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "We see exceptional talent over the course of our annual auditions for the Ensemble Studio and wanted to find a way to share these young artists with a wider audience, which is why we created a public competition component to the process a few years ago. Now, *Centre Stage* is one of the most anticipated events in the COC season."

Ben Heppner, one of the world's most distinguished dramatic tenors and a graduate of the COC's Ensemble Studio, hosts the festivities on **November 25**, when the seven singers perform from the mainstage of Canada's first purpose-built opera house before an anticipated audience of 1,000 people and accompanied by the internationally acclaimed **COC Orchestra** conducted by **COC Music Director Johannes Debus**. Also anticipated is a surprise musical guest joined in performance by the COC Orchestra led by Maestro Debus. *Centre Stage* culminates in an announcement of the competition's winners and an exclusive gala dinner on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre.

COC General **Director Alexander Neef** heads the jury for the vocal competition portion of the evening. He is joined by COC Artistic Administrator **Roberto Mauro**, COC Music Administrator **Sandra Gavinchuk** and Head of the COC Ensemble Studio **Liz Upchurch**, as well as Canadian soprano and Ensemble Studio Head Vocal Consultant **Wendy Nielsen**, who is also a graduate of the COC's program. The judging panel deliberates on location and announces the competition winners at the event's conclusion.

In addition to winning the evening's cash prizes, finalists are hopeful of also earning a place in the COC's Ensemble Studio, which can be the these singers' first steps towards an international career. The *Centre Stage* audience will be hearing the singers selected to follow in the footsteps of such renowned Ensemble Studio alumni

as Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, David Pomeroy, Joseph Kaiser, Allyson McHardy, Lauren Segal and Krisztina Szabó.

Centre Stage takes place at **6:30 p.m.** in R. Fraser Elliott Hall at the **Four Seasons Centre** (145 Queen St. W.). *Centre Stage Competition* tickets are **\$100** and include a pre-competition cocktail celebration in the Four Seasons Centre's sparkling Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room. Specially priced **\$35** tickets are also available for patrons between the ages of 16 and 29 through **Opera Under 30** sponsored by **TD Bank Group**.

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, joined by competition finalists and winners, notable COC artists and key supporters of the opera company. Guests are also treated to a culinary experience by critically acclaimed chef **David Lee**, a rare opportunity to enjoy his gastronomic creations outside of dining at Nota Bene where Lee is the executive chef. *Centre Stage Gala* tickets, encompassing the competitive vocal showcase and an exclusive black-tie dinner, are **\$1,500**, with a limited number available for purchase.

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Competition Supporters: **RBC Foundation, Hal Jackman Foundation, Peter M. Deeb**

Platinum Sponsor: **Mercedes-Benz Canada**

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Gala Reception Sponsor: **Maison Birks**

Artist Sponsors: **Earlaine Collins, Ninalee Craig, Patrick Hodgson Family Foundation, June Shaw and the late Dr. Ralph Shaw, Jack Whiteside**

Prize Sponsors: **First Prize – Colleen Sexsmith; Second Prize – ARIAS: Canadian Opera Student Development Fund; Third Prize – Tom C. Logan; Audience Choice Award – Classical 96.3 FM**

Voting Technology Sponsor: **Classical 96.3 FM and Turning Technologies**

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 opened the Ensemble Studio Competition to an audience of over 1,000 opera lovers and interested guests as it moved from the intimate setting of the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre at the Four Seasons Centre to R. Fraser Elliott Hall. In 2013, the competition finalists were showcased as never before as they performed 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, underwritten in part by Peter M. Deeb and The Slight Family Foundation, is Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals and provides advanced instruction, hands-on experience, and career development opportunities. The Ensemble Studio is also supported by the Government of Canada through the Department of Canadian Heritage, RBC Foundation, Hal Jackman Foundation, W. Garfield Weston 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. For more information on the Canadian Opera Company, please visit its award-winning website, coc.ca.

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