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TORONTO'S CHARLES SY WINS TOP PRIZE AND AUDIENCE CHOICE AWARD AT CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY'S ANNUAL VOCAL COMPETITION

COC's Fundraising Gala, *Centre Stage*, Features Canada's Biggest Opera Stars: Host Ben Heppner and Surprise Performance by Soprano Adrienne Pieczonka

Toronto – Tenor **Charles Sy** of Toronto took home first prize and the Audience Choice Award at the **Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio Competition** on November 25, 2014, at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. The competition is the feature event of the COC's annual fundraising gala, *Centre Stage*, an evening dedicated to the discovery and celebration of the next generation of opera stars. **Sy** was selected from seven finalists to receive the **\$5,000** award. Baritone **Dimitri Katotakis** of Toronto, won the second prize of **\$3,000**, and tenor **Aaron Sheppard** of St. John's, N.L., was awarded the third prize of **\$1,500**. In addition, **Sy** was selected by the audience as the winner of the **Audience Choice Award**, worth **\$1,500**.

Canadian **Ben Heppner**, recognized worldwide as the finest dramatic tenor of his generation, hosted an exhilarating vocal showcase featuring singers selected from this year's nationwide auditions for the COC Ensemble Studio – Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals, of which Heppner is an alumnus. Further adding to the excitement of the evening was the surprise performance by one of Canada's reigning opera stars, soprano **Adrienne Pieczonka**. As the judges deliberated the winners of the competition, COC Music Director **Johannes Debus** masterfully conducted the critically acclaimed **COC Orchestra** as **Pieczonka** sang "Ebben...Ne andrò lontana" from Catalani's *La Wally*, "Pace, pace" from Verdi's *La forza del destino*, and *Zueignung* by Richard Strauss.

"We heard from seven fantastic singers at *Centre Stage* this year, some of whom will go on to have careers like those of Ben Heppner and Adrienne Pieczonka, whose names are associated with the world's foremost opera houses, festivals and performance halls," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "Canada's emerging opera singers deserve to be heard and celebrated, and it's an honour to be able to showcase the promise that these talented young artists represent."

The seven finalists were chosen from a pool of 175 applicants for the 2015/2016 COC Ensemble Studio, of which 150 were invited to sing in preliminary auditions in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and New York. On November 25, the seven singers each performed two arias accompanied by the COC Orchestra, conducted by Debus, before an audience of more than 900 *Centre Stage* patrons and a five-person COC adjudication panel. This year's judges included COC General Director **Alexander Neef**, COC Artistic Administrator **Roberto Mauro**, COC Music Administrator **Sandra Gavinchuk** and Head of the COC Ensemble Studio **Liz Upchurch**, as well as Ensemble Studio alumna and COC vocal consultant, Canadian soprano **Wendy Nielsen**.

In addition to competing for the four cash prizes, the finalists are also hoping to secure a highly coveted position in the **15/16 COC Ensemble Studio**. The 2014 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 15/16 Ensemble Studio over the next few weeks. The 15/16 Ensemble Studio members will join 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 Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, Joseph Kaiser, David Pomeroy, Lauren Segal and Krisztina Szabó.

The Ensemble Studio Competition finalists were generously outfitted by **Hudson's Bay Company** (HBC) for their onstage debut at *Centre Stage*, and have been gifted with their HBC gowns and suits for use in future performances. This is the second year that the COC has partnered with HBC as part of an initiative to help prepare the artists for their professional opera careers.

During the pre-competition cocktail reception, *Centre Stage* guests enjoyed a sumptuous cheese and charcuterie spread by **Cheese Boutique** and a selection of wines from **Trius Wines**. Following the competition, 330 *Centre Stage* Gala Dinner guests went on to enjoy an elegant formal dinner from the Four Seasons Centre stage, joined by competition finalists and winners, notable COC artists, *Centre Stage* host **Ben Heppner**, Canadian soprano **Adrianne Pieczonka** and key supporters of the opera company.

Among the highlights of the gala affair was a surprise performance by current members of the COC Ensemble Studio. Performing with piano accompaniment, the nine singers of the 2014/2015 Ensemble Studio launched into a rousing rendition of "Brindisi" from *La Traviata* while circulating through the gala dinner crowd before going on to sing "Brüderlein" from *Die Fledermaus*. The uniqueness of the evening was further highlighted with a culinary experience curated 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.

Proceeds from *Centre Stage* on November 25 were raised in support of the COC and will go towards the company's Ensemble Studio.

About the Winners

Charles Sy, First Prize (\$5,000) and Audience Choice Award, (\$1,500)

Arias performed: "Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön" (*Die Zauberflöte*) and "Una furtiva lagrima" (*L'elisir d'amore*)

Toronto native Charles Sy currently studies at the University of Toronto (UofT), earning a master of music in opera performance. His UofT credits include Mr. Owen in *Postcard from Morocco*, Ralph Rackstraw in *HMS Pinafore*, Mayor Upfold in *Albert Herring*, Alamão in *Pedro Malazarte*, and covering the title role in *Rob Ford: The Opera*. Additional credits include Remendado in *Carmen* (Opera by Request); Lechmere in *Owen Wingrave* (Banff Centre); Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* (Opera NUOVA); Paolo in *The Wings of a Dove* (The COSI Connection); and Basilio and Curzio in *Le nozze di Figaro* (Toronto Summer Opera Workshop). In 2015, he will sing the role of Adolfo in *La Rondine* with Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

Dimitri Katotakis, Second Prize (\$3,000)

Arias performed: "Hai già vinta la causa... Vedrò mentr'io sosprio" (*Le nozze di Figaro*) and "Mab, la reine des mensonges" (*Roméo et Juliette*)

Born in Toronto, Dimitri Katotakis currently studies at McGill University where recent roles include Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Lorenzo in *Capuleti e i Montecchi*. He earned his bachelor of music in vocal performance from the University of Toronto where he sang the roles of Belcore in *L'elisir d'amore*, Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte*, and M. Lacouf and Le Fils in *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*. Other credits include Escamillo and Le Dancaire in *Carmen*, and Harlekin in *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Opera NUOVA); Le Podestat in *Le Docteur Miracle* (Stu&Jess Productions); Masetto in *Don Giovanni* (Centre for Opera Studies in Italy); Curio in *Giulio Cesare* (Aradia Ensemble); and Chorus in of *Der Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Le nozze di Figaro* (Opera Atelier).

Aaron Sheppard, Third Place (\$1,500)

Arias performed: "Vainement, ma bien aimée" (*Le roi d'Ys*) and "Un'aura amorosa" (*Così fan tutte*)

A native of St. John's, Newfoundland, Aaron Sheppard is currently a member of the Atelier lyrique de l'Opéra de Montréal (OdM). His OdM credits include Hadji in *Lakmé*, Pong in *Turandot*, First Philistine in *Samson et Dalila*, Kronprinz in *Silent Night* and Joe's Brother in *Dead Man Walking*. Additional roles include Tamino in *Die Zauberflöte* and Bonario in *Volpone* (Opera McGill); Pedrillo in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and Monostatos in *Die Zauberflöte* (Salzburg Festival Young Singers Project); Ferrando in *Così fan tutte* (Jeunesses Musicales du Canada); the title role in *Albert Herring* and Prince in *Rusalka* (Opera NUOVA); and Brooklyn Boy in *Lillian Alling* (Banff Centre). Mr. Sheppard is also a recent winner of the Western Canada Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

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 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.

- 30 -

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