

CELEBRATED CANADIAN TENOR BEN HEPPNER TO HOST SECOND ANNUAL CENTRE STAGE: ENSEMBLE STUDIO COMPETITION GALA

*Canada's Next Opera Stars Compete on the World Stage of the Four
Seasons Centre*



Photo Credit: Michael Cooper

TORONTO, ON October 28, 2014 — On November 25, 2014, the Canadian Opera Company presents its annual **Centre Stage: Ensemble Studio Competition Gala** at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts** after its wildly successful inauguration in 2013. Hosting the highly anticipated vocal competition is Canadian **Ben Heppner**, recognized internationally as one of the finest dramatic tenors in the world and one of this country's distinguished operatic talents. **Heppner** helms an evening dedicated to discovering and celebrating the best of Canada's up-and-coming opera stars, with the awarding of cash prizes ranging in value from \$1,500 to \$5,000. The festivities conclude with an exclusive gala dinner on the stage of R. Fraser Elliott Hall.

Competitors for this exciting annual vocal showcase are selected from nationwide auditions for the COC Ensemble Studio, Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals. Since the program's inception 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 this year's **Centre Stage** host **Ben Heppner**, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, Joseph Kaiser, David Pomeroy, Lauren Segal and Krisztina Szabó. The 2014 preliminary auditions are currently underway in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and New York City.

Centre Stage takes place on the mainstage of the **Four Seasons Centre**, with the young singers accompanied by the internationally acclaimed COC Orchestra conducted by **COC Music Director Johannes Debus**. Each finalist performs an aria showcasing their vocal technique and range before an audience and panel of judges. In addition to vying for first, second and third place prizes, worth \$5,000, \$3,000, and \$1,500, respectively, one competitor will also receive the Audience Choice Award valued at \$1,500. In addition, select finalists will be invited to join the COC's 2015/2016 Ensemble Studio, to be announced at a later date.

"We're very honoured to have Ben Heppner join us as the host of *Centre Stage* this year. Ben has had a legendary career as one of Canada's most important and internationally celebrated opera singers and, given his personal connection to the Ensemble Studio as one of its early graduates, he is the ideal ambassador to help introduce to our *Centre Stage* patrons some of the best new opera talent from across the country," says COC General Director Alexander Neef. "The voices we showcase at *Centre Stage* are ones we can expect to hear great things from. It's a thrilling moment for everyone in the audience, including the judges, to experience what happens when these young artists step on to the stage and hear their voices fill the opera house, supported by the COC's magnificent orchestra and our own Johannes Debus."

Ben Heppner is recognized worldwide as one of the finest dramatic tenors of his generation. Over the course of his career, he excelled in the most challenging roles, from Wagner's Tristan and Lohengrin to Verdi's Otello and Berlioz' Aeneas. He's been acclaimed in music capitals around the world for his beautiful voice, intelligent musicianship and sparkling dramatic sense. His performances on the opera stage, in concert with the world's leading orchestras, in the most prestigious recital venues, and in recordings set new standards in his demanding repertoire. He most recently appeared with the COC to critical and popular acclaim in the title roles of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Peter Grimes*, the latter of which marked his last professional operatic engagement before announcing his retirement as an opera and concert singer in April 2014. He is currently host of CBC Radio's *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, and the upcoming Mirvish production of *Titanic* marks his return to the stage.

The competition is followed by a gala dinner with guests treated to a rare culinary experience by **David Lee**, the critically acclaimed **Nota Bene Executive Chef**. Among those in attendance are the *Centre Stage* finalists and winners, notable COC artists and key supporters of the opera company.

Once again, the Canadian Opera Company will be partnering with Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) to outfit the Ensemble Studio Competition finalists for their onstage debut at *Centre Stage*. As part of this

generous sponsorship, the finalists are gifted with their HBC gowns and suits for use in future performances as they embark on their professional opera careers.

Tickets to **Centre Stage** are **\$100** for the cocktail reception and competition. Gala dinner tickets are \$1,500. Tickets are available online at COCentreStage.ca, by calling 416-363-8231, or in person at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts Box Office**, located at 145 Queen St. W., Monday to Saturday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Visit COCentreStage.ca for more information. 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.

Acknowledgements

THE COC ENSEMBLE STUDIO
PROGRAM GENEROUSLY
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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**

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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* in 2013, the COC introduced the Ensemble Studio Competition to an audience of over 1,000 opera lovers and interested guests. The competition showcases finalists like never before as they perform from the mainstage of the COC's world-renown opera house, the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, accompanied by the acclaimed COC Orchestra led by COC Music Director Johannes Debus.

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.

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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