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CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY WELCOMES FIVE PLAYERS TO 2017 COC ORCHESTRA ACADEMY

Toronto – The **Canadian Opera Company Orchestra Academy** returns for its fourth year on January 8, 2017, welcoming five student musicians to its annual three-week intensive training program. This year’s instrumentalists perform opening night of the COC’s production of *Götterdämmerung* with the COC Orchestra, give public performances featuring members of the COC Orchestra and COC opera singers, and take part in masterclasses and private sessions with singers, members of the COC artistic administration and visiting music staff.

The 2017 **Orchestra Academy** auditions featured a wider pool of candidates than previous years with the **Schulich School of Music at McGill University** becoming one of the **COC Orchestra Academy’s** collaborating organizations, joining founding collaborators **The Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory of Music** and the **University of Toronto’s Faculty of Music**.

“Having the Schulich School of Music come on board marks an exciting evolution in the development of the Orchestra Academy,” says **Nina Draganić, Director of the COC’s Ensemble Studio and Orchestra Academy**. “It allows the COC to go beyond the borders of Toronto when connecting with student players.”

“We are so pleased to offer our students the opportunity to acquire professional experience at the highest level through the COC Orchestra Academy,” says **Stéphane Lemelin, Chair of the Department of Performance at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University**. “Working in a top-level opera house with leading singers under the mentorship of experienced instrumentalists from the COC Orchestra promises to be a transformative learning experience for the program’s participants. We are indeed grateful to the COC for this precious collaboration.”

Led by **COC Music Director Johannes Debus**, and developed in collaboration with The Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory of Music, the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Music and McGill University’s Schulich School of Music, the **COC Orchestra Academy** offers its student musicians professional insight and experience in their pursuit of a career in an opera orchestra.

“There’s a palpable excitement from these students about the opportunity offered through our program,” adds **Draganić**. “There are orchestra academies elsewhere in the world, in Toronto even. What distinguishes ours is the connection to the human voice. We give them opportunities and valuable hands-on experience that they can’t get elsewhere.”

The five students who join the **Orchestra Academy** this year were selected from a pool of 13 musicians who were recommended by the partnering institutions, and they were auditioned in October 2016 by **Debus, Draganić** and members of the **COC Orchestra**. The five Orchestra Academy members are GGS violist **Madlen Breckbill**, cellist **James Churchill** and bassist **Jesse Dietschi**, UofT violinist **Heng-Han Hou** and Schulich violinist **Jung Tsai**.

The student players will be paired up with mentors from the COC Orchestra, learning from them in a one-on-one capacity. This year’s mentors are **Sandra Baron**, first violin; **Elizabeth Johnston**, second violin; **Sheila Jaffé**, viola; **Paul Widner**, cello; and **Robert Speer**, bass. The COC Orchestra is the oldest opera orchestra in Canada, and has received worldwide acclaim for its musical versatility and range of expression. Created in 1977, the orchestra has a permanent membership of more than 50 instrumentalists.

As part of the **Orchestra Academy** experience, students are featured in multiple public performances. This year they play with the COC Orchestra at the company's 2017/2018 Season Launch event on January 12. They'll also perform a recital in the COC's **Free Concert Series in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre** on January 26, alongside Orchestra Academy mentors in a program of chamber music from the Baroque era, featuring Canadian soprano and COC Ensemble Studio alumna Jacqueline Woodley. **Orchestra Academy** students join the COC Orchestra in the pit of the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts on February 2 for opening night of the COC's winter production of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, playing some of the most complex and riveting music in the operatic repertoire.

The **2017 Orchestra Academy** continues to expand on the efforts of years past. This year, the students will have increased group sessions with COC Music Director Johannes Debus and with COC Concertmaster Marie Bérard. They'll also have additional opportunities to go behind-the-scenes and experience a backstage tour, a concept discussion with a member of the *Götterdämmerung* creative team, and attend a piano technical rehearsal, as part of the Orchestra Academy's larger objective to give its participants a deeper understanding of the art form and the role played by the orchestra within an operatic production.

Orchestra Academy students are exposed to all aspects of playing as part of an opera orchestra. They experience how an operatic performance comes together, how to prepare their part of a score, and the development and improvement of an orchestra over the course of rehearsals and performances. Additional opportunities include:

- studying rehearsal and performance etiquette, as well as developing the awareness, co-ordination, reaction, flexibility and listening skills required to play in an opera orchestra;
- learning endurance techniques and how to focus for long periods of time;
- gaining an understanding of sound production, articulation and blending as well as tuning within the orchestra, the section and with the singers, and the subtleties of balancing sound intensity;
- and studying different styles and levels of expressiveness in musicianship.

The **COC Orchestra Academy** is an extra-curricular program that launched in January 2014 as a pilot program with the intention of growing the initiative to include more students and members of the COC Orchestra. Members of the COC Orchestra participate in the **COC Orchestra Academy** voluntarily.

2017 COC Orchestra Academy Members

Violist **Madlen Breckbill** recently completed an artist diploma from The Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory of Music, where she is currently studying as an orchestral fellow on viola. As an orchestral player, Breckbill has served as concertmaster and principal second of the University of Wisconsin Chamber and Symphony orchestras; principal second, assistant concertmaster and principal viola for the Royal Conservatory Orchestra; as well as concertmaster of the Kent/Blossom Chamber Orchestra. She has performed under the batons of Johannes Debus, James Feddeck, Leon Fleischer, Tania Miller, and Sir Roger Norrington. In the summer of 2016, Breckbill was a member of the fellowship quartet at Music by the Sea, and appeared in performance at the Madeline Island, Meadowmount and Kent/Blossom music festivals.

Cellist **James Churchill** is currently pursuing an artist diploma at The Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory of Music, having previously earned an Honours Bachelor of Music degree from the National University of Singapore and graduating from the advanced performance program at the Australian National Academy of Music. His extensive orchestral and chamber experience includes engagements with Orchestra Victoria performing operas and ballets and with orchestras in the Melbourne Arts Centre addition to regional tours throughout Victoria, Australia. Churchill was principal cellist for the Australian tour of *Les Misérables* in Sydney and Melbourne and recently performed at Toronto's Koerner Hall as principal cello with the Royal Conservatory Orchestra in presentations of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No.1.

Bassist **Jesse Dietschi** is currently pursuing an artist diploma at The Glenn Gould School at the Royal Conservatory of Music having previously earned a master's degree in jazz performance from the University of Toronto and a master's degree in composition from Brandon University. He performed for the premiere of Juliet Palmer's opera *Shelter* with Tapestry Opera in Edmonton, and was part of the remounting of R. Murray Schafer's *Apocalypsis* as part of the 2015 Luminato Festival. Dietschi has appeared in CBC's *Sounds of the Season* and NBC's *Hannibal*,

and is a member of the contemporary jazz ensemble *Tunnel Six*, as well as the principal double bassist with Kindred Spirits Orchestra. He has performed, toured, and recorded with a wide range of artists, including The Headstones, the Gryphon Trio's Jamie Parker, Robi Botos, the Canadian Tenors' Ken Lavigne, Tapestry Opera, Richard Underhill, Brownman Ali, Irene Torres and the Sugar Devils, and Mexico's Northern Lights chamber music festival. He has also performed in the Winnipeg Jazz Festival, the TD Toronto Jazz Festival and Toronto's Beaches International Jazz Festival, among others.

Violinist **Heng-Han Hou** is pursuing a doctor of musical arts degree at the University of Toronto. An active and versatile musician, Hou has appeared in performance in Taiwan, Canada, Hong Kong, China, Japan, the United States, Israel and Argentina. While participating in the prestigious Orford Music Festival in 2014, Hou was appointed orchestra concertmaster and performed at Maison symphonique de Montréal. He returned upon invitation in 2015. Hou currently holds teaching assistant positions for Jonathan Crow at UofT as well as with the University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

Violinist **Jung Tsai** received a bachelor of music in performance from Mannes College in New York and a master's degree in music performance from DePaul School of Music in Chicago. She is currently pursuing an artist diploma with Schulich School of Music at McGill University. In addition to solo performances, Tsai is an orchestral and chamber musician. She played with the Civic Orchestra of Chicago from 2012 to 2014, serving as assistant concertmaster from 2012 to 2013. Tsai has been invited to perform at the Schleswig-Holstein and Britten-Pears music festivals and in 2015, her string quartet was invited to Festival de Música de Santa Catarina in Brazil. She is also the recipient of the 2015 Luminarts Fellowship in the string category.

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 COC, visit www.coc.ca.

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For more information or to request photographs, please contact:

Jennifer Pugsley, Media Relations Manager, tel: 416-306-2303, e-mail: jenniferp@coc.ca
Kristin McKinnon, Publicist, tel: 416-306-2383, e-mail: kmckinnon@coc.ca