

For immediate release: November 4, 2016

VANCOUVER'S SIMONE MCINTOSH WINS TOP PRIZE AT CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY'S ANNUAL VOCAL COMPETITION

Toronto – **Simone McIntosh** of Vancouver took home First Prize (the Chair's Prize) at the Canadian Opera Company's annual **Ensemble Studio Competition** on November 3, 2016 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. The competition is the feature event of the COC gala fundraiser **Centre Stage**, an annual celebration of Canada's emerging operatic voices. **McIntosh** was selected from seven finalists to receive the \$5,000 award, supported annually by the Chair of the COC's Board of Directors. **Samuel Chan** of Calgary won the Second Prize of \$3,000, and **Gregory Schellenberg** of Vancouver was awarded the Third Prize of \$1,500. **Myriam Leblanc** from St-Lazare, Quebec was the winner of the Audience Choice Award, worth \$1,500.

Legendary Canadian tenor **Ben Heppner** hosted the 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 opening performance by the internationally acclaimed COC Orchestra, conducted by COC Music Director **Johannes Debus**, with the overture to Mikhail Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila* as well as a surprise appearance by one of the most exciting vocal and dramatic talents on the international opera and concert scene, American tenor **Russell Thomas**. Currently starring to critical acclaim as Pollione in the COC's production of *Norma*, **Thomas** was accompanied by the COC Orchestra as he sang "Lamento di Federico" from Francesco Cilea's *L'Arlesiana* and "Dein ist mein ganzes Herz" from Franz Lehár's *Das Land des Lächelns*.

"Our Centre Stage gala focuses the spotlight on the country's best and brightest young stars. The evening is a stage on which big dreams get to play out and we all come away having experienced the first-hand excitement of maybe watching a star being born," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "It was a great night for opera in this country and I look forward to seeing what comes next for all the young artists who competed."

The seven finalists were selected from a pool of **119** applicants for the 2017/2018 COC Ensemble Studio. On November 3, the adjudication panel heard each finalist perform two arias accompanied by the COC Orchestra conducted by Debus. The first aria was sung before a private audience of select COC patrons and the second was before the larger **Centre Stage** public audience of **874** patrons. The adjudication panel was comprised of COC General Director **Alexander Neef**; COC Director of Music and Artistic Administration **Roberto Mauro**; Director of the COC Ensemble Studio and Orchestra Academy **Nina Draganić**; and Head of the COC Ensemble Studio **Liz Upchurch**, Canadian soprano and Ensemble Studio Head Vocal Consultant **Wendy Nielsen**—also a graduate of the COC's program; and **Neil Shicoff**, one of the leading tenors of his generation and now a sought-after vocal coach.

In addition to competing for the four cash prizes, the finalists are hoping to secure a highly coveted position in the company's 17/18 Ensemble Studio. The 2016 competition showcases the opera talent scouted by the COC 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 line-up of the 17/18 Ensemble Studio at a later date. The 17/18 Ensemble Studio members will join an illustrious program that, since its inception in 1980, has launched the careers of over 215 Canadian singers, opera coaches, stage directors and conductors, including Ben Heppner, Isabel Bayrakdarian, John Fanning, Wendy Nielsen, Joseph Kaiser, David Pomeroy, Krisztina Szabó, Allyson McHardy and Lauren Segal.

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, **320 Centre Stage gala** guests went on to enjoy an elegant formal dinner on the Four Seasons Centre stage, joined by competition finalists and winners, notable COC artists, **Centre Stage** host **Ben Heppner**, American tenor **Russell Thomas**, and key supporters of the opera company.

The **Centre Stage gala** culinary experience was prepared by critically acclaimed chef **David Lee**, a rare opportunity to enjoy his creations outside of dining at Nota Bene where Lee is the executive chef. This year, **Lee** was inspired by the famous French steak dish, Tournedos Rossini, rumoured to have been created for composer Gioachino Rossini (1792 – 1868). **Chef Lee** brought his take to the dish with the creation of a progression that nodded to the traditional richness of *haute cuisine* while also showcasing a modern twist. The menu featured appetizers of organic smoked salmon and heirloom carrot; a main course of Perth County beef tenderloin with foie gras, truffle and Madeira; and Hewitt's Dairy crème brûlée for dessert. Guests also received a parting gift of CXBO truffles.

A special highlight of the **Centre Stage gala** dinner was a surprise performance by all 10 current members of the COC Ensemble Studio coming together to delight guests with the “Lippen schweigen” waltz from Lehár's *The Merry Widow* and the “Good Night” quartet from Friedrich von Flotow's *Martha*.

Proceeds from **Centre Stage** on November 3 were raised in support of the COC and will go towards the company's Ensemble Studio.

ABOUT THE WINNERS

Simone McIntosh, First Prize/Chair's Prize (\$5,000)

Arias performed: “Voi che sapete” from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and “Una voce poco fa” from Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.

Vancouver-born mezzo-soprano Simone McIntosh is currently earning her master of music from the Schulich School of Music at McGill University, and received her bachelor's degree in opera from the University of British Columbia (UBC). Her credits include Waitress in *Speed Dating Tonight!* and Meg in *Little Women* (Opera McGill); Donna in *Crush* (Banff Centre); Béatrice in *Béatrice et Bénédicte* (MY Opera); the Fox in *The Cunning Little Vixen*, Giulietta in *The Tales of Hoffmann* and Harry in *Albert Herring* (UBC Opera Ensemble); Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro* (Burnaby Lyric Opera); Cis in *Albert Herring* (Vancouver Opera). This season with Opera McGill, she sings the role of Ruggiero in *Alcina*, Prince Orlofsky in *Die Fledermaus*, and Judith in *Bluebeard's Castle*.

Samuel Chan, Second Prize (\$3,000)

Arias performed: “Lieben, Hassen, Hoffen, Zagen” from Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* and “Hai già vinta la causa” from Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*

A native of Calgary, baritone Samuel Chan received his bachelor of music from the University of Cincinnati College–Conservatory of Music (CCM). In 2015, he was a winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions–Western Canada District. His operatic credits include Donkey in *The Bremen Town Musicians* and Jacob Grimm in *The Brothers Grimm* (Highlands Opera Studio); Bob in *The Old Maid and the Thief* (Fear No Opera); Ruggiero in *Alcina* and Count Almaviva in *The Marriage of Figaro* (Opera D'Arte at CCM); Page in *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (Clermont Philharmonic Orchestra); Pastore II/Apollo in *L'Orfeo* (Cincinnati Chamber Opera); and Don Asdrubale in *Lo sposo deluso* (City Opera Vancouver). His upcoming roles include Gomatz in *Zaide* and Calandrino in *L'oca del Cairo* with City Opera Vancouver.

Geoffrey Schellenberg, Third Prize (\$1,500)

Arias performed: “Avant de quitter ces lieux” from Gounod’s *Faust* and “Largo al factotum” from Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but now based in Vancouver, baritone Geoffrey Schellenberg is currently studying for his master of music at the University of British Columbia (UBC), where he also received his bachelor’s degree. His roles include Papageno in *The Magic Flute* (UBC and European Music Academy); Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Lescaut in *Manon*, Harašta in *The Cunning Little Vixen* and Beaupertuis in *Il cappello di paglia di Firenze* (UBC Opera); the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro* (UBC Opera and Accademia Europea Dell’Opera); Sharpless in *Madama Butterfly* (Burnaby Lyric Opera); and Don Alfonso in *Così fan tutte* (Centre for Opera Studies in Italy). In 2016, Mr. Schellenberg was a winner at the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions–Western Canada District and won audience choice.

Myriam Leblanc, Audience Choice Award (\$1,500)

Arias performed: “Je veux vivre” Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* and “Regnava nel silenzio” from Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*

Soprano Myriam Leblanc was raised in St-Lazare, Quebec and is a current member of the Atelier Lyrique de l’Opéra de Montréal (OdM). She studied at McGill University, where she appeared in the roles of Rosmene in *Imeneo*, Sandman in *Hansel and Gretel*, Eurydice in *Orphée aux Enfers*, Woman’s Voice in *La Rondine*, and was part of the chorus for *The Rake’s Progress*. Additional roles include Grand Priestess in *Aida* (OdM) and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* (Jeunesses Musicales du Canada). In 2017, she sings the role of Micaëla in *Carmen* with Orchestre symphonique de Longueuil and will appear as a soloist with Choeur Classique de Montréal.

CENTRE STAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Platinum Sponsors: **Mercedes-Benz Canada, RBC Capital Markets**

Opera Under 30 Sponsor: **TD Bank Group**

Competition Sponsor: **Hal Jackman Foundation**

Gold Sponsors: **Brookfield Asset Management, Scotiabank**

Artist Sponsors: **Earlaine Collins, Ninalee Craig, and June Shaw and the late Dr. Ralph Shaw**

Prize Sponsors: **Chair’s Prize (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: **Turning Technologies**

Event Supporters: **BT/A, Chairman Mills, Cheese Boutique, Colour Innovations, DMF Flowers, Evoke Designs, Nota Bene, Ryan Emberley, Trius, Turning Technologies, Wellington Printworks**

COC 2016/2017 SEASON ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BMO Financial Group: Season Sponsor

Mercedes-Benz Canada: Official Automotive Sponsor of the COC at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts

TD® Aeroplan® Visa Infinite Privilege*: Preferred Credit Card

TD Bank Group: Presenting Sponsor Opera Under 30

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 for preliminary auditions, 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 215 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, Krisztina Szabó, Allyson McHardy and Lauren Segal.

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, Marjorie and Roy Linden, RBC Foundation 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, the 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. For more information on the Canadian Opera Company, please visit coc.ca.

- 30 -

For more information or to request photography, 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