

For immediate release: October 17, 2016

## **SEVEN CANADIAN SINGERS COMPETE IN COC'S ANNUAL VOCAL SHOWCASE AT CENTRE STAGE GALA FUNDRAISER**

**Toronto** – The **Canadian Opera Company** has selected seven finalists from across the country to showcase in this year's exhilarating vocal competition at its annual gala fundraiser, **Centre Stage**, on **November 3, 2016**. Selected from a pool of 119 aspiring Canadian opera singers, the final seven will take to the stage of Toronto's **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts** to perform selected arias in the hopes of securing a cash prize, ranging in value from \$1,500 – \$5,000, and a highly coveted invitation to join Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals, the COC Ensemble Studio.

**Centre Stage** is an inspiring night to celebrate Canada's emerging opera voices with its feature event, the **Ensemble Studio Competition**, offering patrons in attendance a rare glimpse into the early days of a young opera singer's professional journey. The young singers featured in the 2016 vocal competition are: baritone **Samuel Chan** (Calgary); soprano **Maria Lacey** (St. John's, N.L.); soprano **Myriam Leblanc** (Saint-Lazare, Que.); soprano **Andrea Lett** (Prince Albert, Sask.); mezzo-soprano **Simone McIntosh** (Vancouver); soprano **Andrea Núñez** (Markham, Ont.); and baritone **Geoffrey Schellenberg** (Vancouver).

The 2016 finalists were chosen following preliminary auditions in Calgary, Toronto and Montreal. At **Centre Stage** on November 3, each singer will give a performance showcasing their vocal technique, as well as artistic and interpretive range, before an audience and panel of judges. First Prize, also known as the Chair's prize in recognition of the Chair of the COC's Board of Directors, is valued at \$5,000 with \$3,000 awarded for Second Prize and \$1,500 for Third Prize. An Audience Choice Award, selected by audience vote, is valued at \$1,500. Select finalists may also be invited to join the COC's 2017/2018 Ensemble Studio, to be announced at a later date.

"Centre Stage is a celebration of Canada's emerging opera voices and it's a testament to the richness of talent developing across the country to showcase a cross-section of voices drawn from communities coast-to-coast at the competition this year," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "Every year the pool of finalists bring something new to the competition. This year, with many singers of the same voice type, it's a unique opportunity for the finalists to show their distinctive characteristics and individual artistic flair in how they sing their pieces of music."

COC General Director **Alexander Neef** heads the jury for the vocal competition portion of the evening. He's joined by returning judges 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**, as well as Canadian soprano and Ensemble Studio Head Vocal Consultant **Wendy Nielsen**, who is also a graduate of the COC's program. New to the panel for 2016 is American tenor **Neil Shicoff**, hailed as one of the leading tenors of his generation and now a sought-after vocal coach.

Hosting **Centre Stage** this year is legendary Canadian tenor and CBC Radio personality **Ben Heppner**. A 1984 graduate of the COC's Ensemble Studio, **Heppner** went on to have an illustrious career that took him to opera stages and concert halls around the world before giving his final professional opera performance in the title role of *Peter Grimes* with the COC in 2013. On November 3, 2016, **Heppner** hosts **Centre Stage** for the second time since the gala launched in 2013. He'll oversee the evening's vocal fireworks when the seven finalists perform from the mainstage of Canada's first purpose-built opera house, accompanied by the internationally acclaimed **COC Orchestra** led by COC Music Director **Johannes Debus**, before an audience of 1,000 spectators. The vocal showcase at **Centre Stage** culminates in an announcement of the competition's winners.

Following the competition, **Centre Stage** gala guests go on to enjoy an elegant formal dinner from the stunning vantage point of the Four Seasons Centre stage, joined by competition finalists and winners and notable COC artists, as well as key supporters of the company, including many of Canada's business and philanthropic leaders. Guests are treated to a rare opportunity to enjoy the gastronomic creations of Chef **David Lee** outside of the acclaimed restaurant Nota Bene, where Lee is executive chef. This year's gourmet experience is inspired by the famous French steak dish, Tournedos Rossini, rumoured to have been created for composer Gioachino Rossini (1792 – 1868). Chef Lee brings his take on the contemporary Canadian experience with the creation of a culinary progression that nods to the traditional richness of haute cuisine while also showcasing a modern twist.

Doors open to the Four Seasons Centre (145 Queen St. W.) at **5:30 p.m. for a cocktail reception** with the **vocal competition taking place at 6:30 p.m.** in R. Fraser Elliott Hall. Tickets to **Centre Stage** are **\$100** for the cocktail reception and competition. 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. Gala dinner tickets are **\$1,500**. All proceeds from **Centre Stage** support the COC's Ensemble Studio.

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

---

## **CENTRE STAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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

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

Gold Sponsors: **Brookfield Asset Management**

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 Advertising, Chairman Mills, Cheese Boutique, Colour Innovations, DMF Flowers, Evoke Designs, Nota Bene, Ryan Emberley, Trius, Turning Technologies, Wellington Print**

---

## **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, Allyson McHardy, 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, 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 its award-winning website, [coc.ca](http://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](mailto:jenniferp@coc.ca)  
Kristin McKinnon, Publicist, tel: 416-306-2383, e-mail: [kmckinnon@coc.ca](mailto:kmckinnon@coc.ca)