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BEN HEPPNER RETURNS TO HOST CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY'S ANNUAL CENTRE STAGE GALA

Toronto – When this year's aspiring opera stars take to the stage of Toronto's Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts to compete in the **Ensemble Studio Competition** at the Canadian Opera Company's annual **Centre Stage** gala, they'll do so with legendary Canadian tenor and CBC Radio personality **Ben Heppner** in attendance. One of the finest dramatic tenors in the world, **Heppner** returns on **November 3, 2016** to host **Centre Stage** for the second time since the gala launched in 2013. The grand event is the COC's premier fundraiser and an inspiring night to discover and celebrate the next generation of Canadian opera stars.

Centre Stage delivers a unique glimpse into the early days of a young opera singer's professional journey. The gala's featured event, the **Ensemble Studio Competition**, is an exhilarating vocal showcase of young Canadian singers selected from nationwide auditions, vying for cash prizes and a highly coveted invitation to join the COC's young artist program, the Ensemble Studio, a launching pad to a future international career.

"Ben Heppner is one of the Ensemble Studio's most illustrious graduates and one of Canada's greatest artists. It is an honour to have him back as the host of Centre Stage," says COC General Director **Alexander Neef**. "The singers of our vocal competition are following in his footsteps. He's an inspiration to them and to the Centre Stage audience as to where promising talent can lead."

"Watching the finalists perform in the vocal competition is the best thing about being a host for Centre Stage. I can't tell you how inspiring it is to see these singers go out there and have their moment singing on the stage of a major opera house and move an audience with their voice," says **Ben Heppner**, a graduate of the COC's Ensemble Studio program. "When I was in the Ensemble, back in the early '80s, I didn't have any experience at all. So this was a time I could gain experience on stage, first in a small kind of way, and then moving on to larger roles. It all starts with that first important audition, though, to set you on your path."

Centre Stage kicks off with a black-tie cocktail reception in the Isadore and Rosalie Sharp City Room of the Four Seasons Centre followed by the **Ensemble Studio Competition** in R. Fraser Elliott Hall where the finalists perform accompanied by the acclaimed **COC Orchestra** led by COC Music Director **Johannes Debus**. Following the competition, **Centre Stage** gala attendees enjoy an elegant formal dinner, specially prepared by acclaimed Nota Bene Executive Chef David Lee, from the privileged vantage point of the Four Seasons Centre stage. They will be joined by competition finalists and notable COC artists, as well as key supporters of the company, comprising Canada's business and philanthropic leaders.

Tickets to Centre Stage are **\$100** for the cocktail reception and competition. Gala dinner tickets are **\$1,500**. 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**. All proceeds from **Centre Stage** support the COC's Ensemble Studio.

Tickets are now available online at **COCCentreStage.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 **COCCentreStage.ca** for more information.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The COC Ensemble Studio, underwritten in part by Peter M. Deeb, RBC Foundation and The Slaight 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 Ben Heppner

Ben Heppner is renowned worldwide for his portrayals in the dramatic tenor repertoire. He is a graduate of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio and appeared with the COC on multiple occasions, most notably in *Tristan und Isolde* and in his final professional opera performance in the title role of *Peter Grimes* in 2013. Heppner's illustrious career has taken him to opera stages and concert halls around the world. He is acclaimed for the beauty of his voice, incisive musicianship, and his generosity with his audience. His performances on the opera stage, in concert with the world's leading orchestras, in the most prestigious recital venues, and in recordings have set new standards in his demanding repertoire.

Heppner studied music at the University of British Columbia. He first gained national attention in 1979 as the winner of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation Talent Festival. In December 1998, CBC Television's *Something Special* featured Ben Heppner in an hour-long portrait of the artist. He was a 1988 winner of the Metropolitan Opera auditions and received Grammy® Awards in 1998 for his recording of *Die Meistersinger* on London/Decca records and in 2001 for his recording of *Les Troyens* with the London Symphony Orchestra on LSOLive. Heppner now brings his voice to the airwaves of CBC Radio as host of *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, featuring the finest opera productions and recordings from around the world, as well as *Backstage with Ben Heppner*, where he shares stories from behind the magic curtain and his passion for great classical music. Heppner is a Companion of the Order of Canada.

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 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, 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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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 and Publications Co-ordinator, tel: 416-306-2383, e-mail: kmckinnon@coc.ca