

For immediate release: October 13, 2017

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

### **First Prize Now Valued at \$10,000 with Elora Festival Performance Opportunity**

**Toronto** – The **Canadian Opera Company** has selected seven finalists from across the country to showcase in this year's exhilarating vocal competition at its fifth annual gala fundraiser, **Centre Stage**, on **November 1, 2017**. Selected from a pool of **134** 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 – \$10,000**, a performance opportunity at Ontario's **Elora Festival**, 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 2017 vocal competition are: bass-baritone **Joel Allison** (Ottawa); tenor **Matthew Dalen** (Grande Prairie, Alta.); mezzo-soprano **Simona Genga** (Woodbridge, Ont.); soprano **Natalie Image** (Tsawwassen, B.C.); soprano **Chelsea Rus** (Abbotsford, B.C.); soprano **Anna-Sophie Neher** (Gatineau, Que.); and baritone **Jonah Spungin** (Ottawa).

The 2017 finalists were chosen following preliminary auditions in Vancouver, Montréal and Toronto. At **Centre Stage** on November 1, 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, increases in value to **\$10,000** for 2017, through joint-support by incoming Chair of the COC's Board of Directors, **Justin Linden**, and the Co-Chairs of Centre Stage, **Michael Gibbens and Julie Lassonde**. Also new for 2017, the First Prize winner will receive a performance opportunity at Ontario's Elora Festival, an annual summer celebration of song focusing on choral and classical, as well as world music, jazz and folk. Additional winnings are presented for Second Prize, valued at **\$3,000**, and Third Prize, valued at **\$1,500**. An Audience Choice Award, selected by audience vote, is valued at **\$1,500**. Select finalists may also be invited to join the COC's 2018/2019 Ensemble Studio, to be announced at a later date.

"Every year, as we undertake the preliminary auditions for the Ensemble Studio, the incredible pool of talented singers emerging across this country shines through. This year, in particular, there was an interesting range of voices heard and I'm excited by what the finalists will have to offer in the vocal showcase at the Centre Stage gala," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "The 2017 Ensemble Studio Competition finalists are a combination of new discoveries and artists we've been following who have really blossomed into their talent. Regardless of the outcome of the competition, it will be exciting to watch how all seven finalists realize their potential in the years to come."

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 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 2017 is venerable Canadian soprano **Mary Morrison**, whose contribution to Canadian music is a testament to her extraordinary life and legacy as both a prodigious singer and esteemed voice teacher.

Hosting **Centre Stage** again 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 1, 2017, **Heppner** hosts **Centre Stage** for the third 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 returning **Centre Stage Co-Chairs Michael Gibbens and Julie Lassonde**, and 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.

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.)

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## CENTRE STAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Platinum Supporter: **RBC Capital Markets**

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## COC 2017/2018 SEASON ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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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 – \$10,000, and a performance opportunity at Ontario's Elora Festival, an annual summer celebration of song focusing on choral and classical, as well as world music, jazz and folk. 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 220 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, Sheila K. Piercey, 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, visit [www.coc.ca](http://www.coc.ca).

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