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SIMONA GENGA WINS FIRST PRIZE AT CANADIAN OPERA COMPANY'S ANNUAL VOCAL COMPETITION

Toronto – **Simona Genga** of Woodbridge, Ont. took home First Prize (the Chair's Prize) at the Canadian Opera Company's annual **Ensemble Studio Competition** on November 1, 2017 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. **Genga** was selected from seven finalists to receive the \$10,000 award, jointly supported annually by the Chair of the COC's Board of Directors and the Co-Chairs of Centre Stage, as well as a performance opportunity at Ontario's Elora Festival. **Joel Allison** of Ottawa won the Second Prize of \$3,000, and **Anna-Sophie Neher** of Gatineau, Que. was awarded the Third Prize of \$1,500. **Genga** also won the Audience Choice Award, worth \$1,500.

Legendary Canadian tenor **Ben Heppner** hosted the competition, which featured singers selected from nationwide auditions for the COC Ensemble Studio, Canada's premier training program for young opera professionals, of which Heppner is a graduate. The event opened with a lively performance of the overture from Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* by the **COC Orchestra**, led by COC Music Director **Johannes Debus**. During the judges' deliberation, the audience was further treated to a surprise performance by renowned Canadian soprano **Jane Archibald**, who is the COC's 2017/2018 Artist-in-Residence and recently completed a critically acclaimed run of *Arabella* at the COC. She delighted the audience with renditions of "Non mi dir" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and "Ah fors'è lui – Sempre libera" from Verdi's *La Traviata*.

"**Centre Stage** is an opportunity to celebrate the immense wealth of operatic talent that this country has to offer and, as the strength of this year's competition proved, Canada has a lot to be proud of," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "I continue to be impressed by the level of talent on display from our **Centre Stage** finalists and look forward to following the next stages of their careers."

The seven finalists were selected from a pool of **134** applicants for the 2018/2019 COC Ensemble Studio. On November 1, the adjudication panel heard each finalist perform an aria accompanied by the COC Orchestra conducted by Debus, before an audience of **1,000** patrons. The adjudication panel comprised COC General Director **Alexander Neef**; COC Director of Music and Artistic Administration **Roberto Mauro**; Director of the COC Academy **Nina Draganić**; 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 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.

Centre Stage finalists were also vying for an invitation to join the 2018/2019 Ensemble Studio. COC artistic staff will confirm the line-up of the 18/19 Ensemble Studio at a later date. Those selected to join the Ensemble Studio will join a prestigious program that, since its inception in 1980, has launched the careers of over 220 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. Following the competition, **300 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**, Canadian soprano **Jane Archibald**, and key supporters of the opera company.

The **Centre Stage gala** dinner was prepared by critically acclaimed, Toronto-based chef **David Lee**, and provided a rare opportunity to enjoy his creations outside of dining at Nota Bene where **Lee** is the executive chef. The menu was inspired by Canada's rich culinary history and featured locally sourced regional specialities, which included: appetizers of Wolfhead smoked salmon from British Columbia with heirloom beets, pickled vegetables and cream cheese; a main course of truffle-scented Canadian Prime beef tenderloin with fall root vegetable mash, k2 berries and beef *jus*; and, for dessert, Niagara apple pie with wild blueberries and Quebec maple syrup.

Centre Stage gala dinner guests also enjoyed a surprise performance by current members of the COC Ensemble Studio, as well as three graduates of the program currently starring in the COC's production of *The Elixir of Love*: tenor **Andrew Haji**, soprano **Simone Osborne** and bass-baritone **Gordon Bintner**. **Osborne** and **Bintner** performed "If I Loved You" from the musical *Carousel*, and **Osborne** was joined by **Haji** and current **Ensemble Studio** members for the rousing Brindisi ("Drinking Song"/"Libiamo") from *La Traviata*.

Proceeds from **Centre Stage** on November 1 were raised in support of the COC and will go towards the company's Ensemble Studio.

ABOUT THE WINNERS

Simona Genga, First Prize/Chair's Prize (\$10,000) and Elora Festival performance opportunity; Audience Choice Award (\$1,500)

Aria performed: "Adieu, forêts" from *Jeanne d'Arc* by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Mezzo-soprano Simona Genga, from Woodbridge, Ont., is currently pursuing a Master of Music in opera performance at the University of Toronto (UofT). As a Gerdine Young Artist at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis this summer, she appeared in the choruses for *La Clemenza di Tito*, *Madama Butterfly* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which she also sang the role of the Cabin Mistress. Her additional credits include Nettie Fowler in *Carousel* (Chautauqua Voice Festival); Sister Helen in *Dead Man Walking* (Opera NUOVA); La Sciagurata in *Prima Zombie* and Juno in *Orfée aux Enfers* (UofT Opera); Mistress Quickly in *Falstaff* and Teacup/Dragonfly/Squirrel in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* (UWOpera).

Joel Allison, Second Prize (\$3,000)

Aria performed: "Scintille, diamant" from *The Tales of Hoffmann* by Jacques Offenbach

Bass-baritone Joel Allison, from Ottawa, is currently pursuing his Master of Music in opera performance at the University of Toronto (UofT). He has performed with ensembles such as the National Arts Centre Orchestra, National Academy Orchestra, Theatre of Early Music, Saskatoon Symphony and Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra. His recent credits include Dr. Maletesta in *Don Pasquale* (Stratford Summer Music Festival); Adonis in *Venus and Adonis* (Seventeen Voyces Chamber Choir); Jupiter in *Orfée aux Enfers*, Imeneo in *Imeneo* (UofT Opera); Basilio in *The Barber of Seville* (Saskatoon Opera); Prince Gremin in *Eugene Onegin* (Opera Muskoka Festival); and Antonio in *The Marriage of Figaro* (Brott Music Festival) This season he makes his debut with the McGill Chamber Orchestra in Handel's *Messiah* and sings Leporello in *Don Giovanni* with UofT Opera.

Anna-Sophie Neher, Third Prize (\$1,500)

Aria performed: "Je veux vivre" from *Roméo et Juliette* by Charles Gounod

Soprano Anna-Sophie Neher, of Gatineau, Que., is currently pursuing her Master of Music degree at McGill University. She has also studied at Bard College and the Montreal Conservatory. Her operatic credits include Adele in *Die Fledermaus* (Opera McGill); Pamina in *The Magic Flute* (Bard College); Belinda in *Dido and Aeneas* (Montreal Conservatory of Music); and Barbarina in *The Marriage of Figaro* (Orford Music Festival). She has also appeared as a soloist with Clavecin en Concert, Lachine Schubert Festival, Orchestre de Gatineau, Festival Despax and Festival Lanaudière. Future engagements include Blanche in *Dialogues des Carmélites* with Opera McGill, as well as recitals with Gatineau Symphonic Orchestra and Montreal Bach Festival.

CENTRE STAGE 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, 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, 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 coc.ca.

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