



20 | 21 SEASON SPONSOR: BMO 

Songs of Hope

FROM OUR HOMES TO YOURS



THURSDAY, JULY 9, 2020

Welcome



Tonight, we are in for a unique concert experience.

Our Ensemble Studio artists, together with our Head of the Ensemble Studio Liz Upchurch and COC Music Director Johannes Debus, have prepared a wonderful program — ranging from art song to a showstopping Broadway classic — that will be performed from a different kind of stage than we are used to: their living rooms.

Typically, our young artists would have taken part in a live mainstage showcase in the spring. Tonight's concert takes on a virtual format that is new to the Canadian Opera Company

and, indeed, a direct response to the physical limitations that remain in place, to help curb the spread of COVID-19.

Songs of Hope: From Our Homes to Yours was also inspired by the 19th-century tradition of *Schubertiade*: small, informal gatherings where guests could freely share art and music within the intimate setting of the home. The *Schubertiade*, as composer Franz Schubert and his circle practiced it, comes from a long tradition of domestic music-making, all stemming from the deep-rooted human desire to create and share the things that inspire us, however humble the surroundings.

It is a concept that feels particularly relevant at a time when we find ourselves without access to our theatres and, for many, access to friends and loved ones. Written in the universal language of music, ***Songs of Hope*** is a love letter from our artists to a world grappling with layered uncertainty.

Tonight, we invite you to relax, as you are among friends. And, in this moment, we hope there is comfort and connection to be found in song.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alexander Neef". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Alexander" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Neef".

Alexander Neef
COC General Director

Welcome

In March, when our world changed forever, it was hard to envision how the Ensemble Studio could continue their work from home. We felt a collective sense of shock as we are, after all, a performance-based program. Gradually, we adapted to training online thanks to the extraordinary and creative efforts of our amazing team. It was a huge learning curve for all involved; despite our technological limitations, laggy WiFi connections, and an inability to play in real time together, we realized we could make music together if it was pre-recorded.



With this in mind, the Ensemble Studio was inspired to create a virtual concert with a program that could help lift people's spirits during this stressful and traumatic time. For the first time since this all began, everyone's energy just sparked — I don't think I've seen a concert program come together faster! The artists were so fired up and eager to find a way to give back to our community and spread a positive message of hope through what they do best: performing.

After three weeks in isolation, ***Songs of Hope*** came to life. It's a wonderful mix — of art songs, piano solos, popular songs, and duets — that brings together the music that means the most to us. It was so important for the artists that families from all generations and walks of life could enjoy this music in their homes. This concert comes straight from the heart and was all recorded using a huge variety of cell phones and laptops — no professional studio equipment or sound engineers here! — and artfully sewn together by our team at COC.

I'm sure you will agree that these young Canadian artists are not just extraordinarily gifted, but generous in spirit and soul. They continue to impress me as young people; we're in such good hands — and good voice — when it comes to the future of live music in Canada.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Liz Upchurch". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping loop at the end.

Liz Upchurch
Head of the COC Ensemble Studio

As artists who work in opera, we know that we're telling stories that reflect and shape our place in the world. And in doing so, we have a responsibility to recognize the history of this land and our relationship to that history, as it manifests in ongoing narratives, struggles and erasure. We reaffirm that the land on which we live and create has been a site of human activity for thousands of years and is the traditional territory of many nations including the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.

Program

Liebeslieder Waltzes, Op. 52aJohannes Brahms

- 1. Rede, Mädchen, allzu liebes
- 2. Am Gesteine rauscht die Flut
- 3. O die Frauen

Piano:
Johannes Debus
Rachael Kerr
Alex Soloway
Liz Upchurch

This version of Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzes* (1874) is arranged for piano four-hands without voices. Some say Brahms' inspiration for these works came from his unrequited love for pianist and composer Clara Schumann. You'll find nods to both Schubert and Johann Strauss; he was inspired by the former's musical evenings at home and aimed to have his own works performed in similar informal settings.

"Highland Balou" from *A Charm of Lullabies* Benjamin Britten
text: Robert Burns

Jamie Groote, *mezzo-soprano*
Liz Upchurch, *piano*

First performed in 1947, *A Charm of Lullabies* is a song cycle of five lullabies by English composer Benjamin Britten, set to texts by celebrated British poets. "Highland Balou" features lyrics by Robert Burns, Scotland's national bard, and is set in Scots. "Baloo" is the Scots word for lullaby, and Britten uses traditional lilting rhythms to emphasize the highland setting.

“Silent Noon” from *The House of Life*Ralph Vaughan Williams
text: Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Joel Allison, *bass-baritone*
Alex Soloway, *piano*

Composed in 1903, “Silent Noon” is the second work in Ralph Vaughan Williams’ cycle, *The House of Life*, which sets six sonnets by Pre-Raphaelite poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Vaughan Williams is one of England’s most noted 20th-century composers, who drew much influence from Tudor-era music and traditional English folk tunes.

“Ständchen” D957 from *Schwanengesang*.....Franz Schubert
text: Ludwig Rellstab

Vartan Gabrielian, *bass-baritone*
Rachael Kerr, *piano*

“Ständchen” (Serenade), a deeply affecting lover’s song of yearning, is the fourth in a group of 13 songs written shortly before Schubert’s death and published posthumously as *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song).

Translation:

Softly my songs plead
through the night to you;
down into the silent grove,
beloved, come to me!
Slender treetops whisper and rustle
in the moonlight;
my darling, do not fear
that the hostile betrayer will overhear us.
Do you not hear the nightingales call?
Ah, they are imploring you;
with their sweet, plaintive songs
they are imploring for me.
They understand the heart’s yearning,
they know the pain of love;
with their silvery notes
they touch every tender heart.
Let your heart, too, be moved,
beloved, hear me!
Trembling, I await you!
Come, make me happy!

Translation by Richard Wigmore first published by Gollancz and reprinted in the Hyperion Schubert Song Edition

Impromptu Op. 90 No. 2 Schubert

Rachael Kerr, *piano*

Schubert's *Impromptus* (1827) are a series of eight pieces for solo piano and are among the best known examples of this type of work. They are frequently referenced in pop culture, including films like *Gattaca*, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Amour*.

“Waitin’” from *Cabaret Songs* William Bolcom
text: Arnold Weinstein

Lauren Margison, *soprano*
Rachael Kerr, *piano*

Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer and pianist, William Bolcom, wrote “Waitin’” and many other songs in his *Cabaret Songs* collection for his wife, mezzo-soprano Joan Morris. They first performed it together in 1978.

“L’entretien des muses” Jean-Philippe Rameau
“La Poule”

Alex Soloway, *piano*

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683 - 1764) was one of the most important composers, music theorists, and harpsichordists in 18th-century France. He published his first book of harpsichord music in 1706 and became the dominant composer of French opera during the late Baroque period.

“Cradle Song” Liz Upchurch
text: Sarojini Naidu

Simona Genga, *mezzo-soprano*
Jack Upchurch, *toy glockenspiel*
Liz Upchurch, *piano*

This lullaby was composed by Liz Upchurch for her young son, Jack, and is set to text by Sarojini Naidu (1879 - 1949), an Indian political activist and poet. A proponent of civil rights, she fought for women’s emancipation and was a major figure in India’s independence movement. Gandhi dubbed her the “Nightingale of India.”

“Les chemins de l’amour”Francis Poulenc
text: Jean Anouilh

Anna-Sophie Neher, *soprano*
Rachael Kerr, *piano*

Shortly after the invasion of France in 1940, Francis Poulenc was asked to compose some incidental music for *Léocadia*, a play by Jean Anouilh. He ended up composing one of his most popular pieces, “Les chemins de l’amour,” for the play, which was dedicated to and sung by the famed comedian and singer Yvonne Printemps. It went on to become one of soprano Jessye Norman’s signature recital pieces.

“Happy Days Are Here Again”Milton Ager
lyrics: Jack Yellen

“Get Happy”Harold Arlen
lyrics: Ted Koehler

arr.: Judy Garland/Barbra Streisand

Lauren Margison, *soprano*
Simona Genga, *mezzo-soprano*
Alex Soloway, *piano*

This “Happy Days Are Here Again” (1929) and “Get Happy” (1930) medley was famously first performed by Barbra Streisand and Judy Garland on *The Judy Garland Show* in 1963. There are countless versions of these popular standards, a testament to their enduring appeal, but this one manages to combine the slow expressiveness of Streisand’s version of “Happy Days” with Garland’s signature interpretation of “Get Happy,” which is inspired by the gospel music tradition.

“Danny Boy”Traditional
text: Frederic Weatherly

Matthew Cairns, *tenor*
Alex Soloway, *piano*

“Danny Boy” was composed by English songwriter Frederic Weatherly in 1913 and set to the traditional Irish melody of “Londonderry Air.” It went on to become one of the most popular songs of the century, evoking nostalgia for many in a period marked by political unrest, war and separation from loved ones.

“You’ll Never Walk Alone” from *Carousel*.....Richard Rodgers
text: Oscar Hammerstein II

Lauren Margison, *soprano*
Anna-Sophie Neher, *soprano*
Jamie Groote, *mezzo-soprano*
Simona Genga, *mezzo-soprano*
Matthew Cairns, *tenor*
Joel Allison, *bass-baritone*
Vartan Gabrielian, *bass-baritone*
Rachael Kerr, *piano*
Alex Soloway, *piano*

Originally from the 1945 musical *Carousel*, the song’s powerful lyrics and sweeping melody have given it a life of its own and it’s often sung as a spontaneous musical outpouring of community and hope. From Liverpool F.C. football fans, to performances in support of the anti-Apartheid movement, commemorating the victims of 9/11 and at Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration, this work has comforted and connected since it was written. Most recently, it has become an unofficial anthem in support of frontline workers and quarantined individuals in the UK and the Netherlands, reminding us to “Walk on, walk on, With hope in your heart, And you’ll never walk alone.”

Biographies



JOEL ALLISON — Bass-baritone

Joel Allison knew he wanted to be an opera singer from the age of 19. Originally from Ottawa, he went on to study opera at the University of Toronto. One of the opera singers he most admires is acclaimed Canadian baritone Gerald Finley. Joel dreams of singing the role of Nick Shadow in *The Rake's Progress* and his favourite opera is Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Joel's also a big CFL and NHL fan, and likes spending time with his wife and their aptly named Holland Lop rabbits, Don Giobunny and Loporello. COC roles: Fiorello in *The Barber of Seville*, The Mandarin in *Turandot*, Peter in *Hansel & Gretel* (Opera for Young Audiences), and Schaunard in *La Bohème*.



MATTHEW CAIRNS — Tenor

Toronto-based tenor Matthew Cairns joined the Ensemble Studio this past season after studying opera at the University of Toronto. In 2019, he was named one of CBC's "30 Hot Canadian Classical Musicians Under 30." He made his COC debut last fall as the Prince of Persia in Puccini's *Turandot* and dreams of singing the role of Calaf in that same opera someday or Cavaradossi in *Tosca*, following in the footsteps of his opera idol, Luciano Pavarotti. His favourite opera is another Puccini classic, *La Bohème*. As passionate about cooking as he is about Puccini, Matthew loves a good charcuterie and cheese board — he even considered becoming a chef before he was bitten by the opera bug in grade 12. Besides opera, he is an avid Raptors fan and awaits the return of the NBA season. #WeTheNorth. Recent COC roles: The Gamekeeper in *Rusalka*, The Prince of Persia in *Turandot*, and The Witch in *Hansel & Gretel* (Opera for Young Audiences).



JOHANNES DEBUS — Conductor, COC Music Director

Born in Speyer, Germany, situated in the heart of the famous wine region Pfalz, Johannes has been in Canada for the past 10 years, enjoying his role as Musical Director at the Canadian Opera Company. Some of his favourite pastimes include snow shovelling (yes, seriously!), sourdough bread making, and making up long-winded fantastical bedtime stories. He shares the same birthday as J.S. Bach, and coincidentally, or not, Bach is also his favourite classical music composer. His favourite non-classical music artists are Ella and Louis. What drew Johannes towards opera? The dramatic power created when word and music are brought together into one art form. Besides music and opera, his other addiction is cheese.



VARTAN GABRIELIAN — Bass-baritone

A new member of the Ensemble Studio in the 2019/2020 season, Vartan Gabrielian grew up in Toronto and studied opera at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He dreams of singing the title role in Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele* in the future — his favourite aria is the opera's "Son lo Spirito" — and admires renowned Italian bass, the late Cesare Siepi. Outside the opera house, Vartan enjoys reading, jazz, shawarma, and spending time with his Jack Russell-Poodle cross, Noosh. He's also an athletic triple threat who trains for triathlons when he's not training his vocal cords. Recent COC Roles: The Hunter in *Rusalka* and the Officer in *The Barber of Seville*.



SIMONA GENGA — Mezzo-soprano

Simona Genga, from Toronto, studied opera at the University of Toronto and was named one of CBC's 2018 "30 Hot Canadian Classical Musicians Under 30." The first opera singer she learned about, and still deeply admires, was Canadian contralto Maureen Forrester. An avid interpreter of art song, Simona is drawn to works by German song composers because they remind her of her time studying at the Schubert Institut in Baden bei Wien, Austria. Her ultimate dream opera involves performing in a splashy Cirque du Soleil-esque production staged inside a pool of water while wearing a glittery, scuba onesie. When she's not singing, Simona enjoys listening to comedy specials, supporting her friends at recitals, and learning how to cook *pasta fatta in casa* and other family recipes in her Nonna's kitchen. Recent COC roles: Berta in *The Barber of Seville*, Gertrude in *Hansel & Gretel* (Opera for Young Audiences), and Second Maid in *Elektra*.



JAMIE GROOTE — Mezzo-soprano

Jamie Groote just completed her first year in the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio program. She grew up in Toronto and originally wanted to be a surgeon, but after playing the lead role of Maria in her high school musical of *West Side Story*, she couldn't imagine not performing. Jamie loves big bands and the old crooners, but on the opera side she looks up to renowned Spanish mezzo Teresa Berganza. Her favourite opera is Bizet's beloved hit, *Carmen*, and her bucket list of dream roles includes Octavian in Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* and Charlotte in Massenet's *Werther*. In her spare time, she keeps active by running, practicing yoga and drawing portraits. Recent COC roles: Hansel in *Hansel & Gretel* (Opera for Young Audiences) and Second Wood Nymph in *Rusalka*.



RACHAEL KERR — Pianist/Intern Coach

Rachael Kerr is originally from Grand Rapids, Michigan but now lives in Toronto where she is in her third year as a pianist and intern coach with the Ensemble Studio. She fell in love with opera during her university years (where she also received a chemistry degree in addition to her music degree!) because of its theatrical nature and the extroverted joy of being around people all the time in rehearsal. When it comes to opera, she wants everyone to know that you don't need any special knowledge to enjoy it as an audience member — the stories are universal! Outside the COC, she keeps busy by cooking, practicing yoga, running, hiking, and spending time with her rescue dog, Izzy. Interestingly, for a musician, she can't whistle a note! Recent COC engagements: Intern coach for *Turandot*, *The Barber of Seville*, and *La Bohème*.



LAUREN MARGISON — Soprano

Toronto-born soprano Lauren Margison didn't admit to herself that she wanted to pursue a career in opera until she was 17, but deep down she always knew. She actually started out as a jazz and pop singer, but opera is in her blood — one of her major inspirations is her father, tenor Richard Margison. She went on to join the young artist program at l'Opéra de Montréal before entering the Ensemble Studio in 2018. This season at the COC, she understudied the title role in *Rusalka* — a dream role for her — for celebrated Canadian-American soprano Sondra Radvanovsky, one of her opera idols. When she's not singing, you can find Lauren writing, reading, or knitting. Recent COC roles: Dew Fairy/Sandman in *Hansel & Gretel* (Opera for Young Audiences), Mimi in *La Bohème* (Ensemble Studio performance), and Trainbearer in *Elektra*.



ANNA-SOPHIE NEHER — Soprano

Anna-Sophie Neher hails from Gatineau, Quebec and holds dual Canadian/German citizenship. After seeing her first opera as a teenager (Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*), she knew she wanted to be an opera singer. She studied at McGill University, as well as Bard College and the Montreal Conservatory. Her favourite opera is Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* and she was lucky enough to have performed the role of Blanche in it two years ago. Another dream role is Susanna from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Anna-Sophie loves to take long walks while listening to music (especially folk like Mumford & Sons), cooking, travelling the world, and playing ice hockey with good friends on snowy winter nights. Recent COC roles: First Wood Nymph in *Rusalka*, Dew Fairy/Sandman in *Hansel & Gretel*, Gretel in *Hansel & Gretel* (Opera for Young Audiences), and Lavia in *Hadrian*.



SIMONE OSBORNE — Host/Soprano/Ensemble Studio Graduate
A proud graduate of the Canadian Opera Company's Ensemble Studio, Simone was born in Vancouver, British Columbia and is now based in Germany with her husband (also an Ensemble grad) and their tiny dog Gatsby. As one of the youngest ever winners of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, Simone began her professional career at age 22. She has been fortunate enough to perform on opera and concert stages across North America, Europe and Asia in repertoire ranging from Mozart and Verdi to Strauss and Stravinsky. A true west coast girl at heart, Simone always feels at home near the water, and without fail, will end up at the closest river, lake or ocean when out on a walk or run (with Gatsby of course!). When she's not screaming high notes, Simone can be found on the couch with a book in hand or in the kitchen working on a new healthy dinner recipe or an unhealthy baking recipe. She loves to travel and is always sneaking in a trip to explore a new city between contracts.



ALEX SOLOWAY — Pianist/Intern Coach
Alex Soloway joined the Ensemble Studio this past season as a pianist and intern coach. He grew up in Ottawa, where he spent lots of time as a kid skateboarding and snowboarding with his older brothers. He studied music at the University of Toronto and McGill University. While still a student, he discovered the operas of Alban Berg among others, and got really into 20th-century opera. He also has a background in musical theatre, and likes jazz and spending time improvising at the piano. When Alex isn't at the keys, you can probably find him reading, at the theatre, playing hockey in the winter, or walking in the park with his golden retriever, Mello. Recent COC engagements: Intern coach for *Rusalka* and *Hansel & Gretel*.



LIZ UPCHURCH — Head of the Ensemble Studio
Liz grew up in London, England and started playing the piano at four years of age. (She was jealous of watching her older sister's lessons). She saw her first opera at the age of 12 and swore she would never see an opera again. At the age of 20, Liz contracted a rare eye disease (AZOOR), which left her legally blind. Since then, she has lent her musical talents to numerous causes, including her own charity, The AZOOR Society. She has also expanded the programming of the Ensemble Studio to include tailor-made performances to groups of children and adults with disabilities. She has lived in Toronto for over 20 years with her wife and their 10-year-old son Jack. A great thrill from last year was fishing with him on Georgian Bay and catching a 20-pound lake trout... and then cooking it! Liz Upchurch has run the Ensemble Studio for 21 seasons.

About the Ensemble Studio

Founded in 1980, the COC Ensemble Studio is Canada's premier training program for emerging opera artists.

Its specialized training, performance opportunities, and internationally recognized mentorship ensure the next generation of Canadian opera voices get the platform they deserve.

A TAILORED, COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Every Ensemble Studio member receives a customized training plan, which covers both the artistic and professional aspects of an opera career to prepare them for this highly competitive field. The program is grounded in collaboration and brings together industry experts from a vast variety of disciplines to help these young artists unlock their potential.

Since March, they have continued their training remotely, with virtual coachings, workshops and mentorship sessions taking place online. This concert was recorded from their homes in May 2020.

To learn more about their virtual training experiences, click [here](#).

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