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## **COC MARKS MAINSTAGE SUCCESS, INCREASED COMMUNITY-BUILDING, AND DIGITAL EXPANSION IN 2019/2020 SEASON**

### **Company committed to continued artist development through COVID-19**

**Toronto** – The **Canadian Opera Company**'s 2019/2020 season marked a year of inspired mainstage programming, increased community engagement, and new digital initiatives, as reported today at the COC's Annual General Meeting by **COC Board Chair Jonathan Morgan** and **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. For the first time, the meeting was held virtually, in compliance with local government and health guidelines around indoor gatherings due to COVID-19.

"This past year will be etched into our collective memories for the many challenges it presented, to our company and to the world," says **COC Board Chair Jonathan Morgan**. "However, our 19/20 season was also filled with many significant success stories, including the overall financial health of the organization within the context of this moment. Strong leadership from our Board, combined with additional strategic decision-making for financial strength, has laid the groundwork for strong recovery and growth ahead. In addition, the COC thanks the Government of Canada for its swift action in support of the performing arts, with comprehensive universal programs playing an integral role in keeping the company largely whole."

"The year also marked our final full season led by COC General Director Alexander Neef," continues **Morgan**. "I want to take this opportunity to thank Alexander for everything he has done to develop and champion Canadian opera artistry and innovation. Under his leadership, we have seen internationally acclaimed singers and creators bring their talents to Toronto. We've also seen new faces and fresh energy in our opera house, as the COC has worked to connect with diverse communities. These accomplishments have set the stage for the company's continued evolution and I look forward to seeing what's next – both for the COC and for Alexander."

"To that end," adds **Morgan**, "the **COC Succession Committee**, led by **Colleen Sexsmith**, has been very impressed with the calibre of candidates they have reviewed. The committee is confident that that an announcement regarding the next COC General Director can be expected by the end of the year."

"I cannot overstate how proud I am of the COC's efforts in the 19/20 season," says **COC General Director Alexander Neef**. "Beyond a year that began with so many achievements to celebrate, our audiences tell us that when the pandemic set in, it was our digital projects that kept them connected to the art form and to fellow arts-lovers. Several months in, it is remarkable to witness the incredible capacity in all of us to keep creating and growing in the face of unimaginable obstacles. The past few months have been an eye-opening process for our team, but it's one that has built a strong foundation for exciting digital developments to follow, and is helping us better cultivate a global audience for showcasing Canadian opera talent."

"The COVID-19 pandemic marked a moment of great pause and recalibration for the entire performing arts industry," continues **Neef**. "As spring ushered in a renewed social movement aimed at addressing racism and representation across the sector and the globe, the COC started an ongoing dialogue with staff and artists about creating a workspace that aligns with company values of mutual respect and inclusivity."

**Menon Dwarka**, **Chair of the COC Equity and Diversity Committee**, played a key role in facilitating many of these discussions and has recently accepted a six-month secondment from his position on the **COC**

**Board of Directors** to lend his guidance and expertise to furthering the company's work in this important area of focus. Beginning November 1, 2020, **Dwarka** will be working closely with the COC on creating a strategic plan for prioritizing diversity and inclusivity across all core operations.

**Neef** says that when his tenure with the company ends in the 2020/2021 season, it will be particularly bittersweet. "When I first arrived at the Canadian Opera Company in 2008, I had no shortage of ideas for expanding opera's reach in Toronto and beyond," he says. "However, none of those plans could have ever come to fruition without the trust and support of this team and our dedicated and passionate audiences. I have full confidence that whatever the future brings, the COC will be well-positioned to continue exploring opera's edges, pushing the art form into new creative spaces, and remaining universally known and acclaimed for producing a thoughtful and diverse range of unforgettable opera experiences."

## **2019/2020 SEASON IN REVIEW**

### **FALL 2019**

The COC kicked off fall 2019 with two stunning productions: Puccini's *Turandot*, directed by visionary multidisciplinary artist **Robert Wilson**, and Dvořák's *Rusalka*, with internationally renowned opera director **Sir David McVicar**; the productions marked COC directorial debuts for both. Through a highly collaborative creative process, this *Turandot* veered away from traditional staging, presenting a minimalist and modern environment for Puccini's score to shine through, while also seeking to address some of the problematic stereotypes often associated with the opera. *Rusalka* transported audiences to a dark and richly textured fantasy land, setting a moody and dramatic landscape for superstar Canadian-American **Sondra Radvanovsky** in the title role and her unforgettable rendition of "Song to the Moon."

2019 also saw the COC host the most successful **Centre Stage Gala** in company history, with a **35% increase** in attendance over the previous year. The signature annual fundraiser in support of the **COC Ensemble Studio** training program chose "Subaqueous" as its theme, transforming the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts** into an underwater dream world, inspired by *Rusalka*'s mermaid fairytale. **400 gala dinner guests** gathered onstage in **R. Fraser Elliott Hall**, taking in a spectacular vantage point typically reserved for the world's leading opera artists and showing their support for the next generation of the art form.

Earlier that evening, some of the country's most promising young opera voices competed in the COC's annual **Ensemble Studio Competition**, a night that saw soprano **Midori Marsh** take home First Prize and Audience Choice Award, bass-baritone **Alex Halliday** awarded Second Prize, and soprano **Charlotte Siegel** awarded Third Prize. All proceeds from the competition directly support training and career coaching for members of the **Ensemble Studio**.

In December **Julie McIsaac** was named the company's inaugural **Director/Dramaturg-in-Residence**. The year-long residency involves collaborating with **COC Composer-in-Residence Ian Cusson** on the creation of a COC-commissioned opera for young audiences and is the newest addition to the **COC Academy**, the company's professional development program for young opera artists, creators, and administrators.

### **WINTER 2020**

The new year began with the COC debut of Italian conductor **Speranza Scappucci** for Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Accolades poured in for the fan-favourite production under **Scappucci**'s baton and many audience members called the eye-popping, high-energy experience a delightful respite from grey winter weather.

February at the **Canadian Opera Company** welcomed the return of **Joel Ivany** in the director's seat for Humperdinck's *Hansel & Gretel*. The contemporary take on the children's classic featured an all-star Canadian cast and used colourful projections to transport the opera's storyline from forested woodland to a modern-day apartment complex in Toronto.

This production of *Hansel & Gretel* was also reimagined for young people specifically, as the COC's **Opera for Young Audiences (OYA)** production. For the first time ever, **OYA** was presented on the mainstage of the

**Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts**, complete with pre-show activities hosted in partnership with local community organizations. In addition, the **OYA** production featured five community choirs from the Greater Toronto Area – The **Canadian Children’s Opera Company**, **Common Thread Kids**, **The CultureLink Nai Children’s Choir**, **Reaching Out Through Music**, and **Yip’s Children’s Choir**, creating an unforgettable experience for everyone in attendance.

The company’s work on the mainstage earned the COC a total of **10 Dora Mavor Moore Awards nominations**, including five for *Rusalka*, three for *Turandot*, and two for *Hansel & Gretel*. The digital award show hosted this past June saw *Rusalka* claiming four wins in the Opera Division, including Outstanding Musical Direction for **COC Music Director Johannes Debus** and Outstanding Production.

## **SPRING 2020**

By the middle of March, the situation surrounding the local transmission of COVID-19 had drastically changed and, in an unprecedented moment for the company, the **Canadian Opera Company** was forced to cancel all programming and in-person events through the end of the 19/20 season. The cancellation affected both spring mainstage productions of Verdi’s *Aida* and Wagner’s *The Flying Dutchman*, as well as two of the COC’s annual fundraising events – the **Fine Wine Auction** and **Operanation** – and all educational events and summer camps.

Following the end-of-season cancellations, ongoing support from all levels of government provided critical funds to mitigate and contain the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including much-valued operational funding from the **Toronto Arts Council**, **Ontario Arts Council**, and **Canada Council for the Arts**.

The COC is particularly grateful for the federal universal emergency support measures introduced in response to the pandemic. The Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), which helped keep many businesses intact, was a vital lifeline for the company at a time of unprecedented challenge for the sector.

The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) also served as crucial support and a source of stability for artists and those across the performing arts industry.

The COC also gratefully acknowledges the Emergency Support Fund for Cultural, Heritage and Sport Organizations, administered by the **Department of Canadian Heritage** and the **Canada Council for the Arts**, a resource that provided much-valued flexibility in the early stages of the pandemic.

The company received an outpouring of support from subscribers, donors, members, and other arts-lovers, with **3,053 people choosing to donate the value of their spring tickets** to the COC.

In addition, the company’s year-end matching campaign enabled donors to double the impact of their contribution. **1,196 people** made a gift to this matching opportunity, with **161** of them donating to the COC for the very first time. Together, the COC community and patrons **raised \$329,000** through this philanthropic initiative.

With team members working entirely remotely, the COC quickly shifted focus to an online format for all programming, artist training and development. Members of the **COC Ensemble Studio** continued to receive lessons through video conference, were able to participate in virtual master classes, and learned to adapt planned performances for digital recording and broadcast.

The company created the **Digital Content Hub**, an easy access point for all new digital content creation, including **Opera at Home**. The daily video series featured excerpts from previous productions and new recordings filmed from the safety of artists’ homes, providing much-needed comfort at a time of widespread isolation. The popular **Free Concert Series in the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, presented by TD Bank Group**, was also adapted into three online mini-concerts.

To help bridge the educational gap in music education, the COC created an interactive video series for young people called **Opera Makers: Activities for Young Creatives**. The eight-part, tutorial series provided students learning from home with access to resources taught by some of Toronto's best teaching artists and provided valuable insights into the many creative fields that opera encapsulates.

In May, the COC put out a call for the company's first-ever **Virtual Choir**, led by **COC Price Family Chorus Master Sandra Horst**. The ambitious digital project aimed to seamlessly merge self-recorded voices and percussion to create the rousing "Anvil Chorus" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. In the end, **220 participants from 22 countries around the world** took part in the initiative, truly highlighting the ability of music to transcend language and borders.

In total:

- Viewers from more than 50 countries accessed digital content created in the spring
- More than 5,000 hours of digital content were viewed by June 30, 2020
- Content shared across COC social media platforms led to more than 2.5 million impressions

To view the COC's **2019/2020 Financials At a Glance** as well as the COC's full **Audience Impact Report** please visit [coc.ca/AGM1920](http://coc.ca/AGM1920).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**BMO Financial Group:** Season Sponsor

**Volvo Car Canada:** Official Automotive Partner of the Canadian Opera Company and the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts

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## **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 including a dedicated base of subscribers. Under its leadership team of General Director Alexander Neef and Music Director Johannes Debus, the company has an international reputation for artistic excellence and creative innovation. Its diverse repertoire includes new commissions and productions, local and international collaborations with leading opera companies and festivals, and attracts the world's foremost Canadian and international artists. The COC Academy is an incubator for the future of the art form, nurturing Canada's new wave of opera creators with customized training and support. 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. For more information, visit [coc.ca](http://coc.ca).

- 30 -

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