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COC CELEBRATES NEW LEADERSHIP, NEW AUDIENCES, AND NEW DIGITAL PROGRAMMING IN 2020/2021 SEASON

Toronto – The **Canadian Opera Company**'s 2020/2021 season welcomed a new era of leadership, united audiences around the world through a broad range of digital experiences, and saw significant investments in the future of Canadian opera, as reported today at the COC's **Annual General Meeting** by **COC Board Chair Jonathan Morgan** and **COC General Director Perryn Leech**.

The meeting was hosted from the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts**, with a limited number of speakers in-person and other participants joining virtually through video call. In a **COC Annual General Meeting** first, the meeting was concluded with a special pre-recorded preview of an upcoming performance from the **COC Ensemble Studio**.

"After our previous season taught us all to think and adapt quickly, in the face of unprecedented circumstance, our focus in 20/21 shifted to the long-term realities of COVID-19, while continuing to find new ways to connect audiences with the art form we all love so much," says **COC Board Chair Jonathan Morgan**.

"Conscientious decision-making with an eye to the wider fiscal picture not only enabled us to successfully weather a full season without live opera, it has also placed us in an excellent position on the road to industry recovery ahead. We cannot overstate our gratitude to the **Government of Canada** and **Government of Ontario** through the **Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism, and Culture Industries** for its continued support of the arts throughout this time. In particular, we must thank the **Department of Canadian Heritage** for its significant investment to the future of Canadian opera through the **Digital Infrastructure Enhancements Project**. High-tech recording and broadcast technology installed this past summer is already enabling the creation of exciting new programs, accessible from coast to coast to coast and beyond."

"We were also glad to officially welcome **Perryn Leech** as the COC's new General Director in 2021," continues **Morgan**. "After an international search comprising over 100 candidates from Canada and beyond, the **COC Succession Committee** was most impressed with Perryn's community-building initiatives, willingness to explore and experiment with new directions and ideas, and genuine desire to see more people love and experience opera. We're already seeing a surge of fresh engagement with the company from all new audiences, and I'm looking forward to what comes next under his inspired leadership."

"I am so proud to join and be a part of this incredible company," says **COC General Director Perryn Leech**. "From the moment I started, the COC and its community of passionate supporters have been overwhelming in their enthusiasm and their support. The company is an incredible core of brilliant singers, musicians, technicians and administrators – in the capable hands of this team, no idea is too small or too unattainable. It has been uplifting to collaborate on the ambitious fall season of free digital programming that's being shared right now. The pandemic forced us all to rethink how we do what we do and I'm personally very excited about the new ideas we're now moving forward with as a result."

"Digital programming in 20/21 provided an unparalleled opportunity to connect with new audiences and we'll be looking to continue building on this and deepening our community connections in 2021/2022," continues **Leech**. "We cannot expect people to join us for a show without first introducing ourselves as neighbours and fellow community members, as creative partners, and as fellow artists in the many diverse neighborhoods that

make up this wonderful city. We're working on bringing opera out of the opera house, performed and shared in a way that invites interaction, creative collaboration and, most of all, the curiosity to explore further."

INVESTMENTS AND SUPPORT

Throughout the past season, subscribers, donors, members, and other supporters of the arts remained steadfast in its support of Canadian opera.

"I want to thank all of our supporters for stepping up this year," says **COC Deputy General Director Christie Darville**. "We saw so many of you donating tickets back to the COC during rolling cancellations, and we are touched and most grateful for this incredible passion and generosity. Contributions from corporate, individual, and foundation donors has provided critical support to the talented singers, musicians, directors, craftspeople and so many others who make up our creative community whose livelihoods were deeply impacted by COVID-19. I know that our artists' resilient efforts and commitment to securing the future of opera are matched only by your own dedication to this art form, and I am profoundly grateful to you for standing with us during this difficult time."

Despite the pandemic, supporters rallied around the COC with **2,364 subscribers and donors donating their tickets back to the COC and 1,654 choosing a gift certificate over a refund**. Opera lovers made close to **8,000 donations** during the 20/21 season, with **over 50% of COC annual donors increasing their contributions** at a most critical time for the performing arts industry as a whole.

"Thanks to our supporters, the COC was able to engage our artists in innovative projects, build and deepen relationships with local organizations and community partners, and reach new audiences through reimagined programming," continues **Darville**. "We saw **our online community increase by 66%** thanks to our digital programming efforts, setting the stage for this year's new free digital membership program, engaging **over 50,000 people** from coast to coast to coast in our first month of activity."

Government support continued to play a critical role in bolstering Canadian opera though 20/21 and remains a vital lifeline in the road to industry recovery.

"The performing arts was one of the first and hardest-hit sectors when the pandemic struck in 2020," says **COC General Director Perryn Leech**. "More than a year and a half later, it's clear that ours will remain one of the last to fully resume and so we are particularly grateful for operational funding provided from the **Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and Toronto Arts Council**. Now, more than ever, the **Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy** is helping to ensure the survival of this vital cultural industry."

To view the COC's **2020/2021 Financials at a Glance** as well as the COC's full **Year in Review** please visit coc.ca/AGM2021.

A CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO ARTIST DEVELOPMENT

The **Canadian Opera Company** welcomed four new young artists in 2020/2021 to the **COC Ensemble Studio**: soprano **Midori Marsh**, baritone **Jonah Spungin**, bass-baritone **Alex Halliday**, and pianist **Frances Thielmann**.

While the pandemic prevented in-person coaching and limited performance opportunities, the artists were able to continue their training remotely, taking part in a number of training and development sessions throughout the year including: one-on-one coachings with **COC Music Director Johannes Debus**; workshops on cultivating a digital presence through self-recording and editing, acting for film, and developing personal websites; as well as participation in public industry roundtables, and virtual masterclasses with renowned opera singers **Jane Archibald, Russell Braun, Gerald Finley, Adrienne Pieczonka, and Russell Thomas**.

In total, through virtual training, Ensemble Studio artists completed:

- 216 hours of vocal lessons
- 412 hours of diction & language coaching
- 482 hours of drama & movement coaching
- 1,119 hours of music coaching

In January, the company announced a new artistic residency, welcoming **Amplified Opera** as the COC's inaugural **Disruptor-in-Residence**. The Toronto-based opera collective has built a reputation on commissioning new works, reframing older opera, and championing diverse perspectives as the necessary building blocks for a sustainable and more inclusive art form.

Over the course of the two-year program, the artistic collaboration aims to support increased equity, diversity, and inclusivity within the arts through workshops and training for fellow artists, as well as activities that foster greater community engagement. **Amplified Opera** is co-founded by Canadian performing artists: **Teiya Kasahara 笠原 貞野**, **Marion Newman**, **Asitha Tennekoon**, and Canadian stage director **Aria Umezawa**.

2020/2021 PROGRAMMING IN REVIEW

The summer of 2020 featured a much-anticipated and well-attended online watch party for **Rufus Wainwright** and **Daniel MacIvor's Hadrian**. For the first time since its world premiere in 2018, the COC-commissioned opera was broadcast to the general public in a special one-time-only streaming in partnership with **Montréal Pride Festival**. Nearly **3,000 viewers from 55 countries** around the world tuned in, with many staying up into the early hours of morning in their respective time zones to see the live Q&A with the creative team behind the stunning queer love story.

In September, the COC launched **Opera Everywhere**, a reimagined slate of opera programming designed to adapt to changing guidelines surrounding in-person gathering and events. The multi-platform programming initiative included podcasts, panel discussions, and interactive video series, with participants from all around the world, truly helping to bring opera everywhere.

In total:

- **15,565 hours** of Opera Everywhere programming was watched
- **92 countries** tuned in to watch, listen, or participate in Opera Everywhere
- **54 artists** were engaged in creating tailored digital content, generating over **10 million social media impressions**

October saw the launch of **Key Change: A COC Podcast**, co-hosted by classical singer and culture critic **Robyn Grant-Moran**, a member of the COC's **Circle of Artists**, alongside Canadian stage director, dramaturg, and **COC Academy** graduate **Julie McIsaac**. Through bi-weekly episodes, the series explored opera's past, present, and future with guests from the opera field and beyond, including: soprano **Sondra Radvanovsky**, actor/director **Michael Greyeyes**, and novelist **Cherie Dimaline**. **Key Change** listeners hailed from over 30 countries including Norway, South Korea, Bahrain, and Belgium, with **9,000 downloads** over the course of its first season.

Later in the fall, an interactive digital panel discussion explored the positive physical and mental impacts of experiencing and participating in music with **MindBodyMusic**, hosted by composer **Ian Cusson**. The live digital panel discussion in October brought together artists and scientists to explore music's impact on our minds and bodies. Panellists included current performing artists, as well as scientists who are active musicians themselves: Ensemble Studio soprano **Jamie Groote**, **Dr. SarahRose Black**, **Dr. Charles Limb**, and **Dr. Swathi Swaminathan**.

In the new year, the **Solo Spotlights** series featured **COC Music Director Johannes Debus** turning the spotlight on incredible artists often unseen by opera audiences — the brilliant instrumentalists of the **COC Orchestra**. Over the course of four episodes, nearly **3,000 viewers** tuned in for candid chat and an inspiring

solo performance by: COC Concertmaster **Marie Bérard**, Principal Clarinet **Dominic Desautels**, flute and piccolo player **Shelley Brown**, and Principal Horn **Scott Wevers**.

Gender and Opera brought together artists and creators from across the arts industry in a digital roundtable, sharing personal experiences in dealing with gender constructs and how each would like to see change in the performing arts. The discussion and live Q&A was moderated by **Aria Umezawa**, Canadian stage director and co-founder of **Amplified Opera**. Panellists included: **Avery Jean Brennan**, **Jonathan Christopher**, Ensemble Studio baritone **Jonah Spungin**, and the remaining co-founders of **Amplified Opera**. **More than 1,100 people tuned in** across YouTube and Facebook Live.

Finally, **Spring Break at the COC** gathered artists and craftspeople in exploration of different career paths in the performing arts. Hosted by COC Director of Community Partnerships and Programs **Makenzie Morgan**, the program offered a behind-the-scenes look at **Fantasma**, the company's upcoming original **Opera for Young Audiences**. Daily hour-long sessions featured different artists involved with its creation so participants could learn what it's like to work with composer **Ian Cusson**, design props with COC Props Supervisor **Wulf Higgins**, create costumes and wigs with Costume Supervisor **Sandra Corazza** and Wigs & Makeup Supervisor **Sharon Ryman**, and perform on-stage through an online session with Ensemble Studio artists **Matthew Cairns** and **Alex Soloway**, as well as a final session that explored the creative process with director/dramaturg **Julie McIsaac** and music therapist **Dr. SarahRose Black**.

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH OPERA

The 2020/2021 season brought an exciting expansion for the company's **Opera Makers** program, from a series of video tutorials into highly tailored community collaborations that connected COC teaching artists with local partner organizations.

Programming not only supported and responded to community needs and enriched educational curriculum through opera creation projects, it also opened new pathways into the art form for young audiences. Through the creation of an original opera, participants learned about everything from storytelling and composition, to performance and design, and were empowered to tell the stories of their own communities and lived experiences through music.

This year's partner organizations included:

- **Sistema Toronto**, a free after-school music and social development program for children living in underserved communities
- **West Neighbourhood House**, a neighbourhood centre that works with the community to address critical issues through personal and social change
- **Heydon Park Secondary School**
- **Building Roots**, a grassroots organization that fosters social cohesion across Toronto's Downtown East
- **Youth Enrichment Academy (YEA!)**, an initiative designed to address gaps in after-school programming for youth in Regent Park and surrounding communities
- **St. Elizabeth Catholic High School**
- **York Region District School Board**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BMO Financial Group: Season Sponsor

Thank you to the entire COC community, including our [COC Board of Directors](#), our [Corporate Sponsors and Foundation Supporters](#), [generous public funders](#), [union partners](#), and — most critically — [our audience](#). Your inspiring

support ensured that opera not only continued but flourished in the 2020/2021 season, uniting global audiences and paving the way for a vibrant future.

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. General Director Perryn Leech joined the company in 2021, forming a leadership team with Music Director Johannes Debus and Deputy General Director Christie Darville. The COC enjoys a loyal audience, including a dedicated base of subscribers, and 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.

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