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KAROLINE PODOLAK WINS FIRST PRIZE AND AUDIENCE CHOICE AWARD IN COC'S NATIONWIDE ENSEMBLE STUDIO COMPETITION

Toronto – Soprano **Karoline Podolak** of Toronto took home both **First Prize** and **Audience Choice Award** at the **Canadian Opera Company's Centre Stage: Ensemble Studio Competition** on **November 3, 2022** at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts**. The evening marks the grand finale of a national search for Canada's top young opera singers, all of whom were vying for cash prizes and the chance to be invited for a coveted spot in the company's prestigious **Ensemble Studio** training program.

In a COC first, the annual event in support of the company's **Ensemble Studio** was live-streamed to audiences across the country, providing an unparalleled platform for the young artists to share their talent; also new this year, at-home audiences were able to register in advance to add their vote, live, for the night's **Audience Choice Award**.

Podolak won **First Prize**, a \$7,500 award, as well as the **Audience Choice Award**, which was matched on this night and increased to \$2,000 by an audience member, inspired by the competition's rising young artists.

Soprano **Hannah Crawford** of Toronto won the **Second Prize** of \$5,000.

And, in an added surprise for the evening, tenor **River Guard** of Hamilton, Ontario and tenor **Wesley Harrison** of Windsor, Ontario shared the **Third Prize** of \$3,000.

"The incredible talent, dedication and commitment of Canada's young opera voices continues to astonish me," says **COC General Director Perryn Leech**. "These seven, highly talented young artists should be so proud of what they were able to achieve in reaching this level of artistry—especially considering the many challenges the last few years have presented for gaining live performance experience."

"It has been an electric night in the theatre and I'm also thrilled that, for the first time ever, we were able to share this night with so many audience members beyond the opera house," adds **Leech**. "I know that all of Canada joins me in congratulating our winners and finalists. I look forward to seeing where their operatic journeys take them next."

Seven finalists were selected from a pool of **nearly 100 applicants** and **64 live auditions** nationwide. On **November 3**, each finalist performed two arias, accompanied by the **COC Orchestra** led by conductor **Jacques Lacombe**—one in a closed round for the judges alone, and a final performance for both judging panel and a live public audience. The **COC Orchestra** also kicked off the evening with a rare performance of Sinigaglia's concert overture from Carlo Goldoni's comic play *Le baruffe chiozzotte*.

This year's competition jury comprised COC General Director **Perryn Leech**; COC Director, Artistic Planning **Roberto Mauro**; American mezzo-soprano **J'Nai Bridges** (who sings the title role in the COC's current production of *Carmen*); and Canadian soprano **Adrienne Pieczonka**.

The Ensemble Studio Competition serves as the final stage of the audition process for the 2023/2024 Ensemble Studio, which will be announced at a later date. Those invited to the **Ensemble Studio** will join an innovative program that, since its inception in 1980, has launched the careers of over 235 Canadian singers, opera coaches, stage directors and conductors, including Gordon Bintner, Ambur Braid, Emily D'Angelo, Claire de Sévigné, Wallis Giunta, Miriam Khalil, David Pomeroy, and Krisztina Szabó.

During the pre- and post-competition receptions, **Competition Experience** guests enjoyed a complimentary selection of cheeses, charcuterie, and delicious canapés, including plant-based sushi from **Planta**, as well as opera-themed specialty cocktails, curated by **The Chase**.

Following the competition, **Premium Spotlight Experience** guests went on to enjoy an elegant seated dinner in **H.R. Jackman Lounge** overlooking bustling Queen Street West, dining with the night's finalists and current **Ensemble Studio** artists.

For more on **Centre Stage: Ensemble Studio Competition**, including event details and a full list of finalists, please visit coc.ca/CentreStage.

ABOUT THE WINNERS

Karoline Podolak, First Prize (\$7,500) and Audience Choice Award (\$2,000)

Aria performed: "Sempre libera" from *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi

Karoline Podolak holds a master's degree from the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Poland. Podolak won First Place at the 2021 Polish Academy of Music Tournament, declaring her the best soprano student in the country. She had her operatic debut at Silesian Opera House as Zuzia in Moniuszko's *Verbum Nobile*, and Adele in Strauss' *Die Fledermaus*. She most recently sang Violetta in *La Traviata* at the National Opera and Ballet of Bulgaria. Last year, Podolak won the Toronto-Buffalo District at the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition and was a Region Final Encouragement Winner.

Hannah Crawford, Second Prize (\$5,000)

Aria performed: "Il est doux, il est bon" from *Hérodiade* by Jules Massenet

Hannah Crawford started her vocal journey at just seven years-old, later participating in both high school and community performances to enrich her musical experiences. Crawford graduated last year from Wilfrid Laurier University in Voice Performance, after completing an Honours Diploma in Voice Performance at Cambrian College. This season, she is a part of The Rebanks Family Fellowship and International Performance Residency Program. She also co-hosts a bi-weekly podcast, *The Dreaming Divas*, with her collaborator Simmie J. Patoka, as a way to educate and inspire her own generation of singers.

River Guard and Wesley Harrison, Third Prize (\$3,000)

Arias performed:

River Guard: "Salut! Demeure chaste et pure" from *Faust* by Charles Gounod

Wesley Harrison: "Il mio Tesoro" from *Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

River Guard hails from Hamilton, Ontario. He received his master's in opera from the University of Toronto in 2020, studying with Wendy Nielsen. Guard is a 2021 recipient of The Rebanks Family Fellowship and International Performance and Residency Program from The Glenn Gould School. Operatic roles include: Lensky in *Eugene Onegin* and Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* (Highlands Opera Studio), Male Chorus in *The Rape of Lucretia* (The Glenn Gould School), Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi* (Institut Canadien d'Art Vocal), Miles in Missy Mazzoli's *Proving Up* (Aspen Music Festival and School), and Don José in *La tragédie de Carmen* (l'Atelier d'opéra Université de Montréal). Guard currently lives in Montréal and studies with Canadian tenor Richard Margison.

Wesley Harrison is from Windsor, Ontario and currently based in Montreal, Quebec. Having completed his bachelors in voice performance at Wilfrid Laurier University and his master's in opera and voice performance at McGill University, Harrison has been focused on exploring and refining his voice as well as his expressive abilities. He recently had the opportunity to perform as Don Ottavio in *Don Giovanni* and debut roles in collaboration with

Montreal-based composers. Harrison is keen to continue sharing his passion for music and storytelling with the people around him.

ENSEMBLE STUDIO COMPETITION PARTNERS

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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. 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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