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## **ELISABETH ST-GELAIS TAKES HOME FIRST PRIZE IN COC'S 10TH ANNUAL CENTRE STAGE: ENSEMBLE STUDIO COMPETITION**

**Toronto** – Soprano **Elisabeth St-Gelais** of Chicoutimi, QC took home **First Prize** and the **Audience Choice Award** at the **Canadian Opera Company's** 10th annual **Centre Stage: Ensemble Studio Competition** on **October 26, 2023** at the **Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts**. The evening, hosted by television's **Sangita Patel**, marked 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.

For the second year, the annual event, held in support of the company's **Ensemble Studio**, was livestreamed, providing an unparalleled platform for the young artists to share their craft with audiences across the country and internationally. At-home audiences were also able to register in advance to add their vote, live, for the night's **Audience Choice Award**.

**St-Gelais** won **First Prize**, a \$7,500 award and the **Audience Choice Award** of \$1,000.

Soprano **Emily Rocha** of Courtice, ON won the **Second Prize** of \$5,000.

Bass **Duncan Stenhouse** of Calgary, AB took the **Third Prize** of \$2,500.

"It is truly incredible and inspiring to see this caliber of artistry from young Canadian artists who arrive at this competition from so many different pathways to the art form," says **COC General Director Perryn Leech**. "All of tonight's finalists should be exceptionally proud of where their dedication and hard work has gotten them to date—and where I know their talents will lead them, moving forward."

"It has been a thrilling night in the opera house and I'm delighted that we were once again, through livestreaming, able to share this night with audiences all over the world," adds **Leech**. "I know that Canada joins me in celebrating our winners and finalists and I can assure you will be hearing from these amazing artists soon."

The competition's seven finalists were selected from a pool of **over 100 applicants** and **nearly 90 live auditions** held in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. On **October 26**, each finalist performed two arias, accompanied by the **COC Orchestra** led by conductor **Johannes Debus**—one in a closed round for the judges alone, and a final performance for both judging panel and a live public audience.

This year's competition jury was made up of:

- COC General Director **Perryn Leech**;
- COC Director, Artistic Planning **Roberto Mauro**;
- internationally celebrated Canadian soprano **Adrienne Pieczonka** (returning from the judging panel of last year's competition);
- Canadian conductor and music educator **Daniel Bartholomew-Poyser** (Barrett Principal Education Conductor & Community Ambassador with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra);
- and Canadian actor and director **Thom Allison** (director of Stratford Festival's current production of *Rent*).

The **Ensemble Studio Competition** serves as a final opportunity for COC artistic leadership to hear artists in the multi-stage audition process for the COC's Ensemble Studio, with final members for the 2024/2025 season to 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 nearly 240 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.

Following the competition, **Premium Experience** guests went on to enjoy an elegant, seated three-course dinner, in the **Henry N.R. Jackman Lounge**, which had been transformed into glamorous Studio 145 as part of the night's Hollywood-themed festivities, dining with the night's finalists and current **Ensemble Studio** artists. The meal was created by **The Chase** with a selection of wines curated by **Cavinona Wine Club**.

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

## **ABOUT THE WINNERS**

### **Elisabeth St-Gelais, First Prize (\$7,500) and Audience Choice Award (\$1,000)**

Aria performed: "Vissi d'arte" from *Tosca* by Puccini

Named Radio-Canada's 2023/2024 classical breakout artist, soprano Elisabeth St-Gelais completed a master's degree in the Opera and Voice program at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University. A member of the Innu nation, from the community of Pessamit, sharing her rich culture is paramount to her as an artist. Last year, she made her European debut in the role of Rosalinde in *Die Fledermaus* at the Berlin Opera Academy, won McGill University's Wirth Vocal Prize, and was named one of CBC's "30 hot Canadian classical musicians under 30."

### **Emily Rocha, Second Prize (\$5,000)**

Aria performed: "Caro nome" from *Rigoletto* by Verdi

Soprano Emily Rocha is a recent graduate of UofT Opera. She will tour with the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra next year for performances as Adele in *Die Fledermaus* and Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and perform Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* with the University of Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and Gilda in *Rigoletto* with Opera by Request. She has received an Encouragement Award at the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition. Past operatic performances include Ernestine in *M. Choufleuri...*, Lucie Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*, First Lady in *The Magic Flute*, Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, and premiering the role of Cassandra in *Disobedience*.

### **Duncan Stenhouse, Third Prize (\$2,500)**

Aria performed: "The Song of the Varangian Guest/A skaly groznyje" from *Sadko* by Rimsky-Korsakov

Duncan Stenhouse is a Calgarian bass and composer currently completing his Advanced Operatic Diploma at the Royal Academy of Music under the support of the Sybil Tutton Opera Award. Stenhouse is a proud alumnus of the Memorial School of Music in St. John's where he received his Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance with a minor in Composition. Stenhouse has lived in London, England since 2020, attending the Academy and performing in summer festivals. During this time, he has performed in operas by Britten, Dvorák, Mozart, Puccini, Rossini, Strauss, Stravinsky, and Verdi.

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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](http://coc.ca).

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