

*Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I am Alexander Neef, the General Director of the Canadian Opera Company.*

*Don't worry, all our performers are fine.*

*But I do want to take a moment to speak to you before we start tonight's performance.*

*Over the last few months we have witnessed terrorist attacks all over the world, in Paris, but also in Beirut, Bamako, San Bernardino, Istanbul, Jakarta, Burkina Faso and Nigeria.*

*The common theme of these attacks seems to be a deliberate attempt to undermine the values that form the base of our western societies, most importantly freedom of speech and expression. The terrorists chose to attack places that belong to the entertainment sector, stadiums, concert halls, bars, restaurants and hotels.*

*At the same time our country Canada, has decided to welcome 25,000 refugees from Syria, one of the countries most affected by terrorism and civil war.*

*At the Canadian Opera Company, we feel it is important to not only reflect on the impact of the attacks, but also to honour our Canadian values of freedom, respect for cultural differences, and a commitment to social justice.*

*Tonight marks the beginning of an initiative that will provide access to COC dress rehearsals and performances to refugees and newcomers to Canada.*

*I would like to recognize our partners Lifeline Syria, the Institute of Canadian Citizenship (represented tonight by the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson and John Ralston Saul) and the Canada Council for*

*the Arts (represented by its CEO Simon Brault).*

*I would also like to acknowledge two other special guests: Han Dong, MPP for Trinity-Spadina on behalf of the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Sport and Councillor Norm Kelly from the City of Toronto.*

*Mozart's Marriage of Figaro is uniquely suited to this purpose. It is deeply influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment. It is a piece about personal rights and the freedom of speech.*

*But it deals with those matters in the form of a comedy. As you will see, almost the entire second half of the opera is dedicated to a celebration, a double wedding and the party that follows.*

*Tonight, we want to invite you to celebrate with us the freedom we have to create and enjoy the arts and the privilege to live in a country like Canada.*

*I will leave you with a quote by the great American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein: "This is our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before."*

*Before we begin the performance I would like to ask you to stand for the national anthem.*