

By Jeff Rapsis for HippoPress.com

Living up to its name, the folks at Granite State Opera are poised to begin bringing performances to other parts of New Hampshire. In the meantime, artistic director Phil Lauriat is preparing for the group's next big production—a concert next weekend in Manchester, home to most of their activities so far.

The upcoming event is a one-night-only recital with the imposing title of "Passion, Peril & Pandemonium: A Wild Night at the Opera! Part II." It's set for Friday, April 19 at 8 p.m. at an unusual Queen City venue—the stately St. Joseph Cathedral at 145 Lowell St.

The concert will feature a bevy of professional singers with voices powerful enough to fill the big church and then some. A wide range of arias, duets and ensembles from the standard repertoire will be offered by such artists as Martha Warren (who appeared in the GSO's production of "Carmen" last June), Janice Edwards, Kevin Hill, James Kleyla, and Mark Cleveland, among others. Michelle Alexander will accompany on piano. If you enjoy opera, it promises to be a highlight of the season in Manchester. And if you're new to the field, it's a good way to get a taste of what it's all about. The program Lauriat has planned for the concert includes excerpts from classics such as "La Traviata" and "La Boheme."

The location is a change from the Palace Theatre, scene of earlier Granite State Opera productions including "Part I" of Passion, Peril & Pandemonium in the fall of 2000. Though not abandoning Manchester, GSO is moving its home base to Concord's Capitol Center for the Arts, which Lauriat believes will provide a better home for the company to bring opera to a statewide audience.

"The Capitol Center for the Arts is going to be a great place for us for the foreseeable future," Lauriat said. "It's a good size—about 1,300 seats—has good acoustics, comfortable seats, and is very well run," he said.

The company's first event in Concord will be a gala concert in May featuring legendary mezzo soprano Fredica von Stade.

Though Manchester has been a good base for the company since Lauriat started it several years ago, it's time for GSO to be true to its mission and seek a statewide audience, Lauriat said. An increasingly crowded Palace schedule helped convince him that the time was right to make the move. "I wanted to make sure we didn't be Manchester's company, but New Hampshire's company," he said. Granite State Opera will still stage performances in the Queen City, but "also in other places though the state during the regular season." "... Our recent move to the Capitol Center and St. Joseph's will help expand our reach.

"Lauriat, an experienced singer and conductor, founded the Granite State Opera in 1998 to stage professional opera productions in New Hampshire. Unlike the Opera League of New Hampshire, which contracts with outside groups to import productions to the Palace Theatre, the GSO stages its own original productions. Lauriat, who lives in Temple, is part artist and part entrepreneur who studied the numbers carefully before starting the opera company. Besides music, his background includes stints as a software engineer at the former Wang Laboratories in Lowell, Mass., where he directed the company choir.

"Opera is the fastest growing art form in America," he said. "In 1990, Opera America (the international trade organization for opera) had 80 professional level companies. Now there are over 130. The audience has grown tremendously as well—now 4.7 percent of Americans go to the opera, over 9 million people.

"To Lauriat, the numbers in New Hampshire are equally promising.

"According to the New Hampshire Business Committee for the Arts survey, taken in 2000 shortly before our first public performance, about 8 percent of New Hampshire residents go to the opera. That's about 80,000 tickets per season!"

"If we had four productions at the Capitol Center, with five performances each, that would still be less than a third of that potential. We know that to get there, we need to grow as our audience and support grows," he said. "By the way, when that

survey was taken, about 80 percent of the respondents from the Manchester/Concord area went somewhere else to see an opera. We're trying to give them a reason to stick around.

"Looking back to the past year, Lauriat is proud of the two major productions he staged at the Palace—a sold-out "Carmen" in June and an unusual "Barber of Seville" on Thanksgiving Day weekend that proved somewhat controversial.

"Not all of our productions are going to be traditional and the Barber of Seville was certainly not," he said.

"(Director) Bob Lawson developed a wonderful, nontraditional production that brought many new layers to the best-known comic opera.

"The thing with a 'concept' production is that people get so caught up in the 'concept' that they miss the production, and that happened to a degree with our 'Barber.' People loved it, and people hated it," Lauriat said.

"Our audience, like opera, is passionate, and the last thing the audience wants is a plain vanilla production. I was glad to get the feedback, both glowing and glowering. They care!

"Looking ahead, Lauriat sees a promising future of fully staged productions as well as concerts in other smaller venues—doing for opera what Jame Bolle's Monadnock Music program has done for classical music in the state's southwestern corner.

"Our regular diet would be fairly standard operas, spiced up with some unusual stuff once our audience gets to know and trust us," he said. "I love the standards, and could never get tired of them. My next productions of La Bohème or Le Nozze di Figaro won't be the same as the first time I conducted them.

"Why opera?" "The drama, the orchestra and the singing can add up to an incredible visceral experience. Opera is real—by that I mean that it is an unaided human voice emoting with a full orchestra, and the audience can be swallowed up in the performance and be somehow changed."