

By Joe Stroup for Boston Singers' Resource News

Artistic Director and Conductor of Granite State Opera as well as host of 'The Opera Hour' - a monthly New Hampshire Radio program that showcases new and old works, Philip Lauriat has some very ambitious goals for opera in New Hampshire and he's well on his way to succeeding.

Prior to his current full-time work as a conductor, Philip Lauriat maintained an active career as a lyric tenor. He has appeared with, among other organizations, the Boston Lyric Opera, the Merrimack Lyric Opera, Midland (MI) Music, and the Cincinnati Opera. He has sung such roles as Rodolfo in 'La Boheme', Alfredo in 'La Traviata', and Sam in 'Susannah'.

However, since 1996, this graduate of the Eastman School of Music and Westminster Choir College has been focused on his role as a conductor and on bringing opera of the highest quality to the Granite State. Philip Lauriat made his conducting debut that year with the Raylnmor Opera's production of 'Amahl and the Night Visitors.' He followed this up with his European conducting debut in July, 1998, with the East Slovakian State Opera in a production of 'Le Nozze di Figaro'. During that period he was also the Music Director of the Savoyard Light Opera Company, putting up productions of 'The Gondoliers', 'Of Thee I Sing', and 'The Pirates of Penzance.' More recently, he has been the Conductor of the Seacoast Chamber Orchestra (now known as the Portsmouth Symphony) since Sept, 2004, and he has returned to Raylnmor with productions of 'La Boheme' and a much-praised 'Cosi Fan Tutte.'

But it was as Artistic Director of the GSO, which he co-founded in October, 1998, that he found the means to achieve his dream of bringing fine opera to this part of New England. He sees Glimmerglass Opera, in Cooperstown, NY, as the model for what Granite State Opera should and can be. Indeed, he feels that, in order for GSO to succeed, it needs to aim for the ambitious programming that Glimmerglass offers.

The GSO, based in Concord, New Hampshire, and now in its sixth season, has not only drawn the devoted attention of local opera lovers (attendance in New Hampshire is, per capita, twice the national average) but has also attracted important young singers who are heard at the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Opera, and the San Francisco and Seattle Operas. In addition, such well-known performers as Frederica von Stade (in her first performance of Mahler's 'Ruckert Lieder') and Patricia Racette (in her first performance of Barber's 'Knoxville, Summer of 1915') have collaborated with Mr Lauriat and the Granite State Opera Orchestra.

The kick-off to the GSO's 2005-2006 season was an Opera Gala in September that featured finalists from The Metropolitan Opera National Council Competition. This event was followed, in October, with two performances of Donizetti's 'L'Elisir d'Amore'. The second and final Opera of the season will be Puccini's 'Madama Butterfly'. It will run for two performances during the first weekend of May and, like the Donizetti, it will be sung in Italian with English supertitles.

As in previous GSO seasons, the venue for the second performance of Butterfly in May will be the GSO's regular home, the Capital Center for the Arts; a 1200-seat venue in Concord. However, in keeping with their stated goal of reaching as diverse an audience as possible, the first performance will take place at the Portsmouth Music Hall, a smaller house. It's important to be in Portsmouth to draw an audience because, as he sees it, "The opera audiences in New Hampshire tend to think of traveling North and South rather than West. My goal is to give them opera that they can (almost) stay home for."

An additional feature of this year's GSO season was the rare opportunity to hear the premiere of a work still in progress. In January, Mr Lauriat presented the first act of 'Oscar Wilde', an opera based on that writer's life, with music by the internationally-known, local composer Thomas Oboe Lee and lyrics by Paul Hodes. The work was presented at the Concord Community Music School as a workshop project to a select audience of GSO subscribers and area musicians and featured Boston Lyric Opera baritone David Kravitz in the title role. The cast also included well-known Boston singers Brent Wilson*, Mark Cleveland, Molly Jo Bessey, and Janice Edwards* who were assisted by pianist Michelle Alexander.

"I've wanted to do the premiere of a new work (with GSO)," Mr Lauriat explains. "About a year ago they (Lee and Hodes)

approached us about doing the workshop and it seemed to be ideal. We got to be involved in a new piece without having the process of searching for a composer, hiring a librettist." The work was well-received and drew many enthusiastic comments from the audience which the composer and lyricist want to work into the finished score. Mr Lauriat isn't yet ready to say how soon the work, a full-length, two-act Opera, will be completed but progress continues.

Another way of introducing himself and opera to the New Hampshire audience is by hosting a monthly program on the New Hampshire Public Radio station, WKXL, 1450 AM. Called 'The Opera Hour,' the first show aired last August. These programs give Mr Lauriat a chance to talk about the history of a particular opera and about the composer, and to play excerpts from recordings of the opera.

The January program was devoted to a discussion of 'Oscar Wilde' with the composer and lyricist as guests. The next program, on February 20th, will be about Beethoven's single foray into the genre; 'Fidelio.' Mr Lauriat has chosen a recording that features Christa Ludwig and John Vickers, conducted by Otto Klemperer.

'The Opera Hour' airs at 2:00 on the third Monday of the month. If you are outside the broadcast range of the station you can hear a live stream by going to their website www.wkxl1450.com. Repeats of the show are on Sundays at 5:00 and, beginning with the January show, you can replay the program by going to the website and clicking on Program Archive. From there, click on 'The Opera Hour'. Check out the link below and hear how 'Oscar Wilde' was conceived and developed. Since the premiere of the opera hadn't occurred when the show was taped, you'll instead get to hear excerpts from Thomas Oboe Lee's 'Clarinet Concerto' with the Brockton Symphony and Jonathan Cohler as conductor and solo clarinetist.

The Granite State Opera holds auditions at various times of the year. You will need to check their website, www.granitestate-opera.org, for details. For the present, the chorus is comprised of volunteer singers but it is the aim of the company to evolve to having a paid chorus. Happily, the principal roles are paid. (Mr. Lauriat states that the principals, the pit and the theater all take about equal chunks of the budget.) What does he look for when auditioning singers? "I usually have our particular productions in mind. I listen for a big, open, easy sound and for someone who is communicating; someone who gives me the role and the character (of whatever aria the singer is auditioning with) in their face and their voice. I look for that on-stage sparkle." Mr. Lauriat has been an auditor at Boston Singers Resource Auditions including the most recent 2005 Select Audition, held last November.

Along with his duties as conductor, artistic and music director, and radio show host, Philip Lauriat continues to teach and coach voice, something he has been doing for 25 years. He maintains a studio in Temple, NH, and is in the process of re-establishing a studio in Boston as well. He also continues to sing in smaller venues such as private homes. But these days Philip Lauriat, who was recently named Conductor for the Boston MidSummer Opera (Drew Minter, Artistic Director), considers his rightful place in the concert hall to be just beyond the footlights rather than in front of them.