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**Locally Raised Opera Star Returning for
First-Ever Queen City Appearance**

By Jeff Rapsis for HippoPress.com

A recital in Manchester featuring a hometown singer who's made it big in the opera world is among the highlights of Granite State Opera's upcoming season. Patricia Racette, an internationally acclaimed soprano, grew up in Bedford and graduated from West High. She pursued vocal studies at North Texas State University, and plays lead roles with many of the top opera companies in the U.S. and in Europe. She'll return to the Queen City next spring for her first-ever local appearance—a Granite State Opera recital to be held at St. Joseph Cathedral. Details are still being worked out, but Phil Lauriat, artistic director of Granite State Opera, expects the event will be similar to the group's concert last June that brought mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade and a full orchestra to the Capitol Center for the Arts in Concord.

Local gal or not, she's quite a catch. Racette has appeared with companies ranging from San Francisco Opera to the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, where she's performed in demanding roles such as Desdemona in Verdi's "Otello," the title role in Janacek's "Jenufa," and as Violetta in Franco Zeffirelli's production of "La Traviata." In recent years, she's sung lead operatic roles in Australia, Brazil and all over Europe.

For the Manchester appearance, among the pieces being contemplated are the "letter scene" from Tchaikovsky's "Eugene Onegin," which Lauriat describes with one word: "Gorgeous." Other upcoming Granite State Opera events in Manchester include an invitation-only season kick-off recital on Wednesday, Aug. 20 at the offices of T.F. Moran, a corporate supporter, and possibly a fund-raising dinner and auction this fall.

Granite State Opera's fully staged operatic productions will continue to be performed at the Capitol Center in Concord. Lauriat has staged a number of major productions at Manchester's Palace Theatre, including "Carmen" and "The Barber of Seville," but he now regards the Capitol Center as the group's theatrical home.

Still, Manchester remains on the Granite State Opera radar.

"The city is a good place, and we certainly want to keep performing there, with concerts and recitals and the like," Lauriat said. Due to construction this fall at the Capitol Center, the 2003-04 season will see only one fully staged Granite State Opera production: Mozart's "The Magic Flute," to be performed in January.

Stage director will be Robert Lawson of Franklin Pierce College, who helped create GSO's unconventional production of "The Barber of Seville" at the Palace Theatre in 2001. Set in the 1950s, it caused a few traditional-minded patrons to walk out before the opera ended.

Though Lauriat understands the desire for tradition on the part of many operagoers, he regards such negative reactions as "exciting because they're passionate." For him, the artistic rule remains quality—he only engages top-ranked professional singers for lead roles, and on that score regards the "Barber" performances as among the best ever done by Granite State Opera.

Lauriat feels the emphasis on quality has also helped the company's financial health. Though still a young organization (founded in 1998), Granite State Opera is coping effectively with the current downturn in corporate support for the arts, Lauriat said. Donations and attendance continue to rise after each event, he said, and the secret is not being satisfied with cut-rate performances.

Lauriat will also be involved in an innovative opera program at Memorial School in Bedford. Last year, he helped students in the fourth and fifth grade stage a production of Benjamin Britten's short opera "The Little Sweep." This year, plans call for creating an entirely new opera and performing it in the spring. The libretto (by New Hampshire author Rebecca Rule) is already done, and Lauriat is now figuring out how to make music out of it.

"It's a fun thing, but boy, do those kids work," he said. Looking further afield, Lauriat said Granite State Opera plans two fully staged productions in Concord for 2004-05, and he'd also like to expand the company's performing region outside the Merrimack Valley to include venues such as The Music Hall in Portsmouth and Keene's Colonial Theatre.