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# Milestones™

News and Possibilities for Seniors

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**Home Energy**  
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Photo by Raymond W. Holman Jr.

Margaret "Peg" Garwood's fifth opera, based on the Hawthorne classic, 'The Scarlet Letter,' will be given its premiere this month by the Academy of Vocal Arts.

## Composer Peg Garwood's fifth opera, written at age 83, to premiere here

By Linda L. Riley

Playing the piano, Margaret "Peg" Garwood is transformed into an impish sprite, smiling and almost chuckling as she brings forth her musical arrangement of E.E. Cummings' poem, *what a proud dreamhorse*.

"I haven't played in so long," she protests before agreeing to perform. Not that she hasn't been working — far from it. The previous day was spent at the Academy of Vocal Arts, auditioning singers for the premiere of her new opera, *The Scarlet Letter*, based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel.

This is Garwood's fifth opera, and at 83, she says she may not write another. The joy displayed in talking about it belies her words; but she did not come easily to composing.

Garwood played piano since she was

two years old, and studied the instrument at Philadelphia Musical Academy (PMA, now part of the University of the Arts), before embarking on a teaching career.

She was teaching at the PMA branch at 52nd and Spruce Sts., when a woman came in "with this beautiful little boy, about six years old, [who] played *The Minute Waltz* with one hand and banged on the piano with the other." Recognizing genius, Garwood sent him to PMA's main branch. The little boy was André Watts.

"I had no idea of writing," she recalls, "because women didn't compose or conduct," but after five years of intense psychoanalysis, "all of a sudden, I was able to get rid of the prohibitions." Her first composition, completed in 1963, was *LoveSongs*, a

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## Emergency Fund in crisis; balance perilously low as season of highest demand nears

By Marcia Z. Siegal

The Emergency Fund for Older Philadelphians, which provides crisis assistance to help low-income seniors purchase food, fuel, medications and other necessities, is itself in crisis.

Its balance is down to \$22,000 going into the winter, the season of highest demand for assistance. According to Chris Gallagher, director of Philadelphia Corporation for Aging's (PCA) Helpline call center, the balance was \$126,620 at this time last year.

"The number of referrals increased by 16 percent last year, and the amount disbursed jumped by 30 percent over the previous year," Gallagher said. A total of \$281,866 in emergency assistance was provided between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2010, up from \$215,993 the previous year.

While demand was increasing, funding was drying up, according to Joan Zaremba, director of marketing and corporate relations for PCA. "Foundations that have provided funding in the past tell us they can't help this year," Zaremba said. "Some have changed direction in what they fund, and others simply haven't the resources."

Of the nation's 10 largest cities, Philadelphia has the highest percentage of persons 65 and over, and its elderly experience poverty at a rate exceeding the state's and the nation's. The Emergency Fund was created in 1989, and has had to close down due to lack of funds only once,

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Photo by Raymond W. Holman Jr.



**Composer/pianist Margaret Garwood**

## opera

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song cycle to poems by E.E. Cummings. A commission from the Choral Arts Society for a choral trilogy followed, along with other award-winning song cycles, widely performed.

Then in 1967, came her first opera, *The Trojan Women*, dubbed "an unqualified success" by *Opera News*. More followed, along with performances, accolades and awards. In 1983 she completed her third opera, *Rappaccini's Daughter*, based on a Hawthorne short story.

"I thought: I'll have to do *The Scarlet Letter*," she says, but didn't feel ready for it. Fourteen years later, she had written the first act, which was performed by the Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA) in 2002, and "ever since, I've been trying to finish it."

Asked how she transliterates from the novel to opera, she says, "I read and absorb the novel thoroughly and then I don't look at it again till much later. The music writes the libretto, almost."

Garwood says, "Someone asked him [Hawthorne] once if it would make a good play, and he said, 'no, not a play

— but it would be a good opera.'"

AVA's world premiere of Garwood's *The Scarlet Letter* will be at the Merriam Theater, 250 S. Broad St., Nov. 19 and 20, with shows at 8 p.m., and Nov. 21 at 3 p.m. For information or tickets: 215-735-1685, Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., or [www.avaopera.org](http://www.avaopera.org).



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