

'EMMELINE': OEDIPUS IN NEW ENGLAND

Joseph McLellan April 2, 1997

The setting is 19th-century American, but the story and treatment have some of the mythic quality of ancient Greek tragedy in Tobias Picker's opera "Emmeline." Its world premiere Santa Fe Opera production will be shown on "Great Performances" tonight at 9 on Channel 26.

"Emmeline" is something like the tragedy of Oedipus and Jocasta -- a tale of incest between a mother and son, unwitting but disastrously punished -- told, for once, from the mother's viewpoint. "There are many Oedipus operas but not a Jocasta opera," says Picker, who based his work on the 1980 novel "Emmeline," by Judith Rossner. "This is not about him. It's about the mother."

The plot seems improbable, but is based on a true story. In Act 1, Emmeline Mosher (Patricia Racette), a 13-year-old girl from an impoverished family in the pre-Civil War small town of Fayette, Maine, is sent to work in a textile mill in Lowell, Mass. The money she sends home helps to keep her family alive through hard times. Totally ignorant about sex, she is seduced by her shop foreman, Mr. Maguire (Victor Ledbetter), without quite knowing what is happening, and becomes pregnant and has to leave the mill. In nearby Lynn, Mass., her Aunt Hannah (Anne-Marie Owens) takes her in, keeps her condition secret from the rest of the family, and puts the baby up for adoption.

Emmeline, who has never seen the child, goes back home to Maine in Act 2 believing she had a daughter. Twenty years go by; she meets and marries a younger man, Matthew Gurney (Curt Peterson). At her mother's funeral, Aunt Hannah meets Matthew for the first time, then quickly discovers and announces that he is Emmeline's son. He runs away; she considers leaving

town but decides it would be pointless and lives on to a ripe old age as a social outcast, shunned by her horrified family and neighbors.

Picker has been known until now primarily as a composer of instrumental music, but his orchestral work has a sense of drama that transfers well into opera. His melodies are carefully tailored to the words and crackle with dramatic tension. The music intensifies the emotions in J.D. McClatchy's powerful libretto, rising to a tremendous climax in the Act 2 recognition scene. "Emmeline" is the latest and one of the best in a series of new works -- others include Dominick Argento's "The Aspern Papers" and John Corigliano's "The Ghosts of Versailles" -- that are winning a large and enthusiastic audience for American opera.

Virtuoso performances are given by the principal singers, particularly Racette in her portrayal of a 13-year-old and a woman in her mid-thirties. Conductor George Manahan and director Francesca Zambello generate a strong impact. CAPTION: Patricia Racette, right, as a 13-year-old with Anne-Marie Owens. CAPTION:-and as a woman married to her son (Curt Peterson) in Santa Fe's "Emmeline." (Photo ran in an earlier edition)