Rita Shane: ‘A Unique Star Among Us’

A little bit of sunshine left Rochester when my dear friend and colleague Rita Shane, professor of voice at Eastman since 1989, died in October after a brief and courageous battle with cancer at the age of 78. Rita was a world-renowned opera singer of a rare vocal category (dramatic coloratura soprano) and equally rare as an artistic colleague. A native of New York City, she didn’t attend a music school but studied at Bard College under Beverly Peck Johnson, a brilliant vocal technician whom I knew later in my own studies in piano accompanying at the Juilliard School.

Rita became a leading soprano at the Metropolitan Opera for 10 seasons after her 1973 debut in what became her signature role, the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s The Magic Flute. She also sang at the Chicago Lyric, San Francisco, New York City, and many other American opera companies, as well as in Milan, Vienna, Munich, and a dozen other houses in Europe and South America. She performed roles in Manon, Lucia di Lammermoor, L’elisir d’amore, Carmen, and La bohème, as well as creating the title role of Miss Havisham’s Fire by Eastman alumnus Dominick Argento ‘58E (PhD) for New York City Opera.

Rita taught her students with a sunny disposition and an ebullient smile that was not only figure, but a vital element of the vocal technique that she cultivated with her devoted and successful Eastman students. Many of them would move to New York City after completing their degrees, where she generously helped them with their careers whenever she could. One of the earliest of these alums was tenor John McVeigh ‘93E, who when not at Rita’s bedside during her illness this fall, was rehearsing himself at the Met for seven productions this season.

Every week for 25 school years, this command-