

Lee, M. Owen 1930 –

(Father Owen Lee, Mark Owen Lee)

PERSONAL:

- Born May 28, 1930, in Detroit, MI;
- son of Robert L. (a drafter) and Helen Lee.
- *Ethnicity*: "Irish-German."
- *Education*: University of Toronto, B.A., 1953, M.A., 1957; University of St. Michael's College, S.T. B., 1957; University of British Columbia, Ph.D., 1960.

ADDRESSES:

Home and office—St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, 81 St. Mary St., Toronto, Ontario M5S 1J4, Canada.

CAREER:

- Roman Catholic priest of the Congregation of St. Basil;
- University of Toronto, St. Michael's College, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, lecturer, 1960-63, assistant professor of classics, 1963-68;
- University of St. Thomas, Houston, TX, associate professor, 1968-70, professor of classics, 1970-72;
- Loyola University, Chicago, IL, associate professor of classics, 1972-75;
- University of Toronto, St. Michael's College, began as associate professor, became full professor of classics, 1975-95, professor emeritus, 1995 —.
- Commentator and panelist, as "Father Owen Lee," for Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, beginning 1983.

MEMBER:

- American Philological Association,
- Virgilian Society.

AWARDS, HONORS:

- Summer scholar at American School of Classical Studies, Athens, Greece, 1963;
- Canada Council research grant, 1966;
- Gold Medal, Assumption University, 1993;
- honorary doctorates, University of Toronto, 1994, University of Windsor, 1994, Catholic University of America, 1998, and St. Michael's College, 2001;
- Father Owen Lee Scholarship Fund endowed by Paul and Nancy Nickle at University of Toronto, 2001;
- *Opera Canada* Award, 2001;
- award from Wagner Society of Washington, DC, 2001.

WRITINGS:

(Associate editor), *The New Saint Basil Hymnal*, Willis Co. (Cincinnati, OH), 1958.

Word, Sound, and Image in the Odes of Horace, University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 1969.

Top Ten: A Personal Approach to the Movies, Vantage (New York, NY), 1973.

Fathers and Sons in Virgil's Aeneid: Tum Genitor Natum, State University of New York Press (Albany, NY), 1979.

Death and Rebirth in Virgil's Arcadia, State University of New York Press (Albany, NY), 1989.

Wagner's Ring: Turning the Sky Round, Summit Books (New York, NY), 1990.

First Intermissions: Twenty-one Great Operas Explored, Explained, and Brought to Life from the Met, Oxford University Press (New York, NY), 1995.

Virgil as Orpheus: A Study of the Georgics, State University of New York Press (Albany, NY), 1996.

The Olive-Tree Bed and Other Quests, University of Toronto Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1997.

A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne, University of Toronto Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1998.

Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art, University of Toronto Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 1999.

Father Lee's Opera Quiz Book, University of Toronto Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2000.

The Operagoer's Guide: 100 Stories and Commentaries, Amadeus Press (Portland, OR), 2001.

Athena Sings: Wagner and the Greeks, University of Toronto Press (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2003.

A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life; A Memoir, Continuum International Publishing Group (New York, NY), 2004.

The Great Instrumental Works, Amadeus Press (Pompton Plains, NJ), 2006.

The Best Films of Our Years, Author House (Bloomington, IN), 2007.

Contributor of more than 200 articles and reviews to journals in the United States, Canada, England, Italy, Denmark, and Germany, including *Classical Philology*, *Phoenix*, *Ramus*, and *Opera Quarterly*.

SIDELIGHTS:

The editor of *Opera News*, Rudolph S. Rauch, described M. Owen Lee as "an erudite classicist, a popular lecturer and a passionate opera-lover." Although Lee's books include studies of film and the classics, he is probably best known for his studies of opera. For decades he served as a commentator on the Texaco-Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts. When first invited to appear on the broadcasts, Lee was told by producer Richard Mohr that his interpretations should not only be original but "instantly intelligible to the little old lady in Dubuque and the little old gentleman in Des Moines." Lee generally made his comments during the intermission between each opera's first and second acts. This explains the title of his book *First Intermissions: Twenty-one Great Operas Explored, Explained, and Brought to Life from the Met*, which presents edited versions of many of the scripts he delivered on the air from 1984 to 1993 on works by Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Strauss, Puccini, and others. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer characterized *First Intermissions* as "rewarding casual reading," found Lee to be "an inspired guide to the operas considered" and concluded that these "radio talks deserve their recovery from the ether."

In *A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne*, Lee examined twenty-three more operas, combining transcripts of his radio talks with articles published in magazines and original essays written for the collection. In addition to standard repertory, Lee also looked at more obscure works, such as

Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, and the musicals such as *Oklahoma*, *Porgy & Bess*, and *Show Boat*. Rauch had high praise for *A Season of Opera*, dubbing it a "splendid" book "that will intrigue anyone who enjoys thinking about the art form." Rauch was impressed with Lee's ability to combine classical insights with popular anecdotes and explanations, though he observed that at times the author's "erudition threatens to overwhelm." Rauch also remarked that Lee's "religious faith is evident throughout this book, particularly in his chapter on *Falstaff*." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer described the collection as "eloquent," and concluded that Lee's "passion for opera and his sensitivity to what the works say about the human spirit make his essays a great pleasure to read."

Father Lee's Opera Quiz Book was as "infuriating" to one *Opera Canada* contributor as it was delightful. The nearly fifty puzzles collected here were originally published in *Opera Quarterly* to test the mettle as well as the knowledge of opera scholars and fans alike, and the reviewer found the collection to be utterly captivating.

The Operagoer's Guide: 100 Stories and Commentaries is a different sort of helpmate. Lee chose one hundred operas that he believes are most important to the audience of today and explains them to the typical lay enthusiast in a matter that *Library Journal* commentator Timothy J. McGee called "refreshing, well written, informative, and extremely useful." Lee provides a carefully condensed synopsis of each entry that includes an overview of plot and characters, the historical and artistic context of the work, and a discussion of musical style and performance history, among other helpful facts. Lee also offers a recommended recording of each work, available on compact disc and in print at the time of his writing. Alan Smith told readers of *American Music Teacher* that Lee's guide

can be appreciated "by all manner of persons whose life is in music and specifically in opera."

It is Father Lee, the priest, whose voice is heard in *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art*. He urges readers to try to separate Wagner the anti-Semite and Wagner the posthumous musician of Nazi Germany from Wagner the gifted composer. In his book, wrote an *Opera Canada* reviewer, "Lee guides us through the complexities of our multilayered and multidimensional feelings about Wagner with clarity and simplicity." Lee is no apologist for Wagner, noted Michael S. Cole in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*; in fact, he acknowledges Wagner as a man who believed that Catholic priests should be shot, but he insists that music lovers can learn from Wagner's music. Lee's position, according to Cole, is that Wagner's music reflects, not only "the reconciliation of sacred and profane ... but also a synthesis of the values of the Middle Ages and those of the Renaissance."

It is Lee the whole man—priest, classicist, teacher, and music lover—whose voice emerges in *A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life; A Memoir*. This is a memoir, not of Lee's entire life, but of one pivotal year during which he taught classics to American students in the city of Rome in the 1970s and used the weekends to explore the operatic offerings of other West European cities. Lee's reminiscences range widely over the many facets of his life and work, revealing "a master teacher whose joy is to stimulate and liberate his students," Robert Imbelli commented in *America*, but they also reveal a spiritual crisis that Lee experienced, during which his faith and his commitment to the priesthood were severely tested as he came to understand what it truly meant to turn his back on family and parenthood in obedience to his sacred vows. "The

resolution of Father Lee's conflict is the spiritual heart of his book of hours," Imbelli wrote.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL SOURCES:

BOOKS

Lee, M. Owen, *A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life; A Memoir*, Continuum International Publishing Group (New York, NY), 2004.

PERIODICALS

America, February 21, 2005, Robert Imbelli, review of *A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life; A Memoir*, p. 25.

American Music Teacher, April-May, 2002, Alan Smith, review of *The Operagoer's Guide: 100 Stories and Commentaries*, p. 91.

American Record Guide, March, 2000, Donald R. Vroon, review of *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art*, p. 298; March, 2002, Michael Mark, review of *The Operagoer's Guide*, p. 254; March-April, 2004, review of *Athena Sings: Wagner and the Greeks*, p. 286.

Commonweal, December 3, 2004, Lawrence S. Cunningham, review of *A Book of Hours*, p. 33.

Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought, winter-spring, 2004, Michael S. Cole, review of *Wagner*, p. 153.

Library Journal, November 15, 1994, Steven R. Harris, review of *First Intermissions: Twenty-one Great Operas Explored, Explained, and Brought to Life from the Met*, p. 68; August,

2001, Timothy J. McGee, review of *The Operagoer's Guide*, p. 111.

Music Educators Journal, May, 2002, review of *The Operagoer's Guide*, p. 69.

Opera Canada, winter, 1999, review of *Wagner*, pp. 45-46; winter, 2000, review of *Father Lee's Opera Quiz Book*, p. 45; winter, 2001, Wayne Gooding, review of *The Operagoer's Guide*, p. 43.

Opera News, April, 1999, Rudolph S. Rauch, review of *A Season of Opera: From Orpheus to Ariadne*, p. 95; October, 2001, Joanna Guinther, review of *The Operagoer's Guide*, p. 85; February, 2004, John W. Freeman, review of *Athena Sings*, p. 79.

Publishers Weekly, October 24, 1994, review of *First Intermissions*, p. 50; August 24, 1998, review of *A Season of Opera*, p. 35.

Reference and Research Book News, May, 2006, review of *The Great Instrumental Works*.