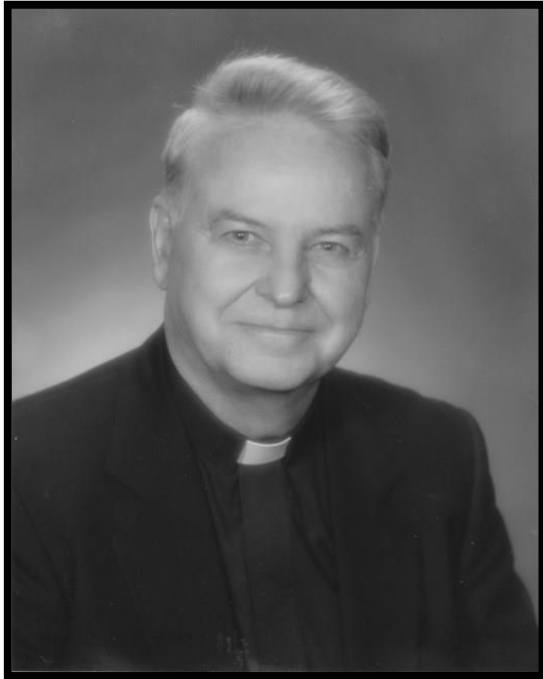


In Memoriam – Father Owen Lee

by Iain Scott

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His voice was immediately recognizable to millions of opera fans worldwide, but he was not a singer. For over twenty-five years Toronto-based Father Owen Lee was the pre-eminent radio voice providing insights, interpretations and commentaries on operas on the Metropolitan Opera's radio network. His radio talks were so influential that the host company received more fan mail for him than for any other performer on their weekly live broadcasts.

Long before he established himself as an international radio personality, he had earned a formidable reputation as an essayist, providing the Met's monthly magazine "*Opera News*" with multiple articles, each of which provided penetrating insights into the operas being broadcast that month. His first article, on "*Die Meistersinger*", in 1968, was so influential that it was reprinted in that summer's Bayreuth Festival program.

After fifteen years as a print contributor, he was invited to join the Met's "on air" team and immediately became a star. Between 1989 and 2003 he was selected to give a record 45 first intermission lectures as a "commentator" and no fewer than 75 second intermission features as a "panelist" on "*The Texaco Opera Quiz*". For Canadian audiences, he also starred in 23 quizzes hosted by Stuart Hamilton for the CBC.

Since radio is a notoriously ephemeral medium, we are lucky that 21 of his "*First Intermissions*" commentaries found their way into a published compendium. This book became so successful that he followed it up with a selection of his magazine articles and program notes for major performing companies in "*A Season of Opera from Orpheus to Ariadne*". This was then further expanded in a third book, "*One Hundred Operas*". His fourth book of musical commentaries dealt with the orchestral repertoire.

Indispensable as these books are, his four books on Wagner have perhaps been even more influential. In a crowded field dominated by pretentiousness, prolixity and impenetrability his analyses of Wagner and his works are models of concision and brilliant clarity. His beginner's guide to the Ring Cycle "*Turning the Sky Around*" is one of the best-selling books on opera, according to Amazon.com. His three more specialised books, "*Wagner: the terrible man and his truthful art*", "*An introduction to Die Meistersinger*" and "*Wagner and the Greeks*" have become essential reading for opera lovers of all tastes.

My personal favourite book by Father Lee is his analysis of quests and questing "*The Olive Tree Bed*" which explains the journeys of Homer's Odysseus, Cervantes' Don Quixote de la Mancha, Virgil's Aeneas, Goethe's Faust and Wagner's Parsifal in terms of the psychological models developed by Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung.

All of Father Lee's opera commentaries are characterised by his generous and compassionate understanding of human suffering - derived from his 60 years of experience as a pastoral Catholic priest. They are also infused with his deep appreciation for the epic poetry and influential plays of ancient Greece and the extensive Latin literature of ancient Rome. This was honed through almost 40 years of classroom lecturing and mentorship as a Professor of Classics at St Michael's College in the University of Toronto. His scholarly studies of the odes of Horace and his

three books on each of the great poems of Virgil are greatly admired by classicists.

Some of the qualities that further endeared him to opera audiences, his prodigious memory and his infectious wit, are apparent in his other interests. He could name the third baseman of each world series. He kept a list of the ten best films of each year of his long life. His favourite party trick was to ask you for the month and date of your birth and then play the top of the pops for that date for you on the piano.

He ranked with Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye, and Frederick Banting as one of the most world-famous members of the U of T community, and like them is remembered with affection, gratitude and admiration by millions.

Rest in peace, good Father.

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