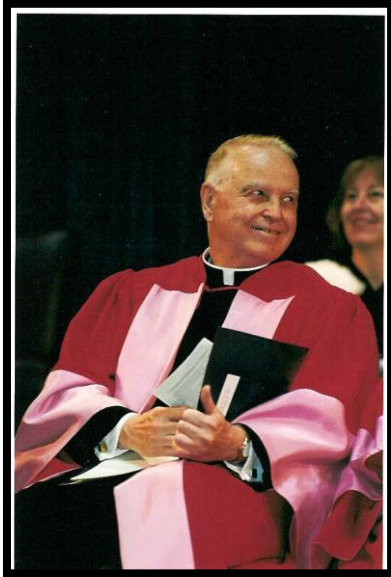


**Father Owen Lee – Recipient of the OPERA CANADA “RUBY” Award
for 2001 as “EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR”**

An appreciation by Iain Scott

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A few weeks ago, a beaming Father Owen Lee stood, resplendent in scarlet robes. He was about to become a Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, and was listening to the citation for his fourth honorary degree. The laudatory speech was being delivered, impishly but proudly, by his friend and colleague for 57 years, Father Bob Madden.

In the Convocation audience, listening attentively, I was studying the expressions on the faces of the other academic worthies adorning the platform. Suddenly, I saw every eye brighten, then every head nod in unison. The dignitaries were all spontaneously reacting to a single line in the elegant tribute: “His is easily the single best-known name at the

University of Toronto”. What a range of academic emotions on that stage! Academic renown and reputation, yes. But fame? Popular celebrity? The recognition and adoration of millions around the world? Well! Some faces displayed jealousy. Most, appreciatively and wryly, acknowledged how true that statement was. Today, it was the University that was being honoured.

For one so famous, Father Owen Lee is a strangely sequestered and private man. A few, fortunate ones indeed, have the intimacy of being a friend or a colleague. Hundreds more know him as their priest, the leader of parish rituals and sacraments, the hearer of confessions, or the comforter at a deathbed. Thousands have learned from him as a university professor, respected by his peers for his scholarship and writing and revered by his students for his inspirational teaching, mostly on the poetry of Horace and Virgil, but also on comparative literature, film and art. But millions throughout north America, in Europe and around the world, feel as if they know him, albeit remotely, through his voice alone. To them, he is a true “opera star”. He can sing – very well – and has the recent distinction of having sung both anthems at a Blue Jays game in the Sky Dome. But it is his speaking, not his singing voice that has brought fame as an opera star. He excites and delights not only with his awe-inspiring technical virtuosity, but also with that other quintessential quality of a star - his ability

to relate to each member of an audience, to touch their hearts and souls. This is the mark of every genuine performing artist.

He was first invited to join the Texaco Opera Quiz Panel, on the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, in 1983. Like Ben Heppner, his stardom and international fame came suddenly and spectacularly after a long apprenticeship. It was fifteen years since his first magazine article, on "*Die Meistersinger*", had appeared in the Metropolitan Opera Guild's "Opera News". Over that span of time, the magazine had already published no fewer than 17 of his informative, insightful and penetrating articles. These had all been well received, but it was with his broadcast debut, however, that a star was born. His brilliant interplay with the gravel-voiced, feisty defender of all things Italian, Alberta Masiello and the urbane, sophisticated playwright, Terrence McNally, immediately established him as a panellist of extraordinary abilities and universal audience appeal. Here was a man whose brain was clearly equipped with a gigahertz-fast Pentium chip; whose hard drive stored vast quantities of detail and anecdotes; and whose speed of recall was astonishing. His ability to convey and articulate immense knowledge with precision, clarity and wit were unrivalled ... even amongst such literary and broadcasting giants as Otto Jellinek, Bill Livingstone, William Weaver, and Martin Bernheimer. From that first appearance, the Met's burgeoning mailbag has proved him to be the most popular of all quiz panellists. Since 1983, he has appeared in, or rather starred in, over 70 quiz broadcasts, including 3 as quiz master, standing in for an ailing Edward Downes. His worldwide audience now numbers in the tens of millions.

The man who engaged him for the quiz, the then producer of intermission features, Richard Mohr, had been a legendary producer of stellar opera recordings. From this experience he had developed an ability to recognise exceptionally talented individuals and to get the best out of them. Sensing his capability for greater things, Mr Mohr offered Father Lee the even more prestigious and even higher risk opportunity of hosting the first intermission. Once more, his instincts were validated. No one since the beloved Boris Goldovsky, not even the captivating John Culshaw, had elicited such an overwhelmingly engaged audience response, from cognoscenti to neophytes. The chosen vehicle for his first intermission feature was Berlioz's magnificently flawed masterpiece "*Les Troyens*" – an opera ideally suited to talents of a man who is not only a Virgilian scholar, but also an accomplished musician, an experienced explainer of the complex and an enthusiast for the less well known. I well remember the impact hearing this first broadcast had on me. I believe I have listened to, and taped,

every one of the 37 intermission features the good father has delivered since 1984, but to this day, his first remains my personal favourite.

See if you become as enthralled as I was, as you read the introductory three paragraphs from that now legendary first script. The lines are crafted with the deft rhythms and subtle cadences of an experienced poet; sculpted with the engrossing immediacy of a master storyteller. First they inform, then they engage. The style is perfectly judged for a radio audience, with short sentences and visual imagery (trembling hands, misty eyes). Here's how he began ...

“Deep in the vaults of the Vatican Library there rests a lordly, venerable manuscript called the Codex Palatinus. It is the oldest manuscript to contain virtually all of the writings of the poet Virgil, who lived out his lifetime in Italy just before the birth of Christ. Usually, with a Latin author from antiquity, we are lucky if we have a manuscript as close to him as the twelfth century. But with Virgil, the most quoted and loved of all ancient writers, manuscripts from the sixth and fifth and even the fourth centuries have survived. Florence and Verona and Sankt Gallen have some of them, but the others rightly reside in Rome, in the library of the popes. Rightly, for Virgil's greatest work, the *Aeneid*, is the epic of Rome, of its ambivalent past and its long future. It is also an epic of spiritual fatherhood, of the *pius Aeneas*, the faithful Aeneas. So it is fitting that the noblest copies of the poem rest in the library of the spiritual leader whom his people call father, who has sometimes been named Aeneas, and who has twelve times chosen for himself the name Pius. And it is fitting that the Codex Palatinus lie in the heart of the city it proclaims will live for ever.

One year I taught in Rome. In fact, I taught Virgil's *Aeneid* there, to young American students. And that year I realised my ambition to see the Codex Palatinus. Doing so was not exactly easy. I had to convince the serious librarians at the Vatican that I was, if not a serious scholar, serious at least about seeing the great Virgilian manuscript. The librarians were understandably wary of entrusting one of their deathless treasures to my mortal hands. They looked on me suspiciously as one who was in pursuit of an aesthetic experience, not a scholarly one. Well, they were right.

But in the end, they brought the fourth-century tome to my assigned desk, and carefully placed it on my assigned lectern. I was given detailed instructions, which I was careful to

follow. My hands trembled as they touched, my eyes misted as they scanned, those ancient pages. The familiar Latin lines, in beautifully clear capital letters, looked out at me searchingly across the centuries.”

Completely hooked, I wanted to learn more. The elements of Father Lee’s star quality are apparent: the deeply learned classical scholar who can brilliantly communicate with laymen; the humanitarian with whom all can empathise. Both the catholic priest and the university professor are there, but are under-stated and discreet. Here above all is the defining characteristic of a great teacher, not the sage on the stage, but a guide at the side.

Perhaps just one more revelatory quotation, this time from another broadcast, will further illuminate his talents. The excerpt captures only a partial picture of its author. It misses his inexhaustible treasure-house of baseball lore; his infallible ability to name, and then to sit down at the piano and play, the hit show tune from whichever month and year that you were born; his encyclopaedic knowledge of movies; his delightful fund of anecdotes. But in many ways it eloquently sums up Father Lee, the man. In a broadcast talk on his favourite opera, he once explained ...

“What moves me most about *Die Meistersinger* is the humanity of Hans Sachs. He is, in fact, a model for me. He is an educator who teaches not just rules and techniques, but how to think and feel. He loves music as much as he loves his chosen profession, and he sees the connection between the two. He is a celibate whose true children are the lives he touches and enriches. He is the good man I would like to be. He comes to see deeply into life, to accept its inevitable limitations, and to embrace it fully. He is the character that a man, when he doubts and fails and prays and wonders, can want to identify with, and grow with.”

As we all nod appreciatively, it is clear why Father Lee is a star, why his name is undoubtedly the single best known at the University of Toronto, and why he is richly deserving of another award, the coveted “Ruby”. But again, it is we who are honoured.

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