

# Hunter Profile: Benno Lee

by Antholus Palmos and Sandra Posner

THE CONCERT SERIES of Hunter College is now in its fifth successive season. Again, as in every other year, the program is studded with world-famous performers who are gathered together in one series only by the organizing genius and experience of the concert-director of the college.

Benno M. Lee is seen to best advantage against the background of his office on the third floor of the college, where he conducts all his affairs from arranging and making complete plans for the concerts to selling the tickets. He occupies a large, sunny room, the walls of which are papered with announcements of future concerts, pictures of the artists and diagrams of the Hunter auditorium. As he sits at work behind his large, polished desk, piled with papers, a small, stoutish man with thinning hair and a cordial smile, two forces seem to be at work in him simultaneously. His eyes and his low, emphatic voice, tinged with a German accent, reveal an energetic, even excitable nature. But the deliberation and economy of his movements emphasize the sureness and steadiness of purpose underlying his temperament.

His purpose is to bring more and more music to Hunter College and to New York City, and his efforts to achieve this are untiring. His vast experience makes success inevitable. The wall behind Mr. Lee's desk is completely covered with inscribed pictures of numerous celebrities with whom he has been associated: Giacomo Puccini, Pietro Mascagni, Lotte Lehman, Yehudi Menuhin, Jascha Heifetz, Thomas Mann, Vladimir Horowitz.

"Listen," he says, laughing, "I knew Horowitz and Menuhin when they wore short pants—so of course they play for Benno Lee! And Feuermann, he used to say, 'For no one else do I play in a concert with other performers, but for Benno I will do it!'" At this he looks toward Mrs. Lee, who is the other occupant of the office for approval. Chic Mme. concert-director, "a real Viennese blonde," as her husband chuckles proudly, is in charge of the office during the day, seeing to visitors, attending to appointments, phone-calls, and ticket-sales. Her husband usually does his work at the college in the evenings.

Together they have made possible the appearance of more than thirty artists in the five years that Mr. Lee has been concert-director. Before that time he was a leading producer of Vienna and one of the most popular men in his country, until his expulsion from Austria by the Nazis in 1940. Now a citizen of the United States with five successful years in this country behind him, he often looks back on the past, and the enthusiasm in his voice and manner adds the final touch to a colorful career.

"ALL THIS—MY LIFE," he sighs, "began strangely for me. Listen, I was so far removed from music as I could be, for I started my career as a banker in Vienna." In this the young Lee was following in the footsteps of his father, who was a high officer in the ministry of finance in Cairo. Benno Mohammed Lee was born in Cairo of a Turkish mother and a Hungarian father, and he spent his early life in Egypt. When his father died, however,

his mother moved to Vienna, where he went to school and prepared himself to become a banker. But his temperament was not fitted for this occupation, and he began to grow away from it.

"I was poetic by nature. In Vienna, who could help being so! Listen, I'll tell you," he confided, indicating his thinning gray hair, "when I was younger and I had, of course, much more hair, I was very fond of writing poetry and I would give readings for my friends. No, I was never a musician myself, but I always felt it here, in my heart!" During the first World War, Benno Lee first recognized his ambition and his talents when as a Grand Officer in the Red Cross he organized and produced concerts and festivals. He also worked for many charities. One of his earlier triumphs was the production of *Aida* on a gigantic scale, where one thousand actors were on the stage in the Hohe Warte outside Vienna, and Pietro Mascagni conducted. He also aided in directing at the Vienna Burgtheater and was the first to produce *Danton's Death* with Max Reinhardt.

The role of a concert-director required all the imagination, ingenuity and resourcefulness which Mr. Lee possessed. To be concert-director is to be agent, producer, and stage manager, and at the same time stand all the financial risks of the enterprise. But Mr. Lee was in his element. He gave a "command" performance of his production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* in the garden of the palace of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. He also brought the orchestra and choir of the Vienna State Opera to the Vatican to perform before Pope Pius XI. His productions were famous in Florence, Rome and Budapest, and in Vienna he was official concert-director for the city.

"I had so many decorations from the government," he explained wryly, "if I

wore them all, I would look like a Christmas tree."

BUT FAME NEVER LOST its excitement for Benno Lee. Years later, when he waited in Naples for the opportunity to embark for America after the invasion of Austria, he was gratified to discover that he was known and remembered there. "There was a young woman in the Naples Opera Company—a violinist," he recalled. "She begged me to write to the consul to recommend that she get a visa to come to America with us. I wrote him—on some old stationery that I had left from Vienna. And he knew who I was! He remembered I had been concert-director for Vienna." When he and Mrs. Lee left for the United States, the violinist went with them.

Benno Lee was on Hitler's black-list primarily because of his connection with the Austrian government. He was imprisoned for a year in the concentration camps of Dachau and later Buchenwald. The horrors of those camps where men lived uncertain of their fate and of the fate of the world can never be erased from his mind. His wife was questioned several times by the Gestapo, but finally he was released and they were permitted to leave Austria. It was with gladness and hope that the Lees looked toward America as they waited in Naples. All they had left of the old Vienna was memories.

"There is one golden memory that remains in my mind as the supreme achievement of my career. I had organized in Vienna what was the greatest concert the world had ever seen. *One thousand musicians are playing Johann Strauss* and their conductor is the master's own grandson. Ah! can you just see it, how it was then?" His eyes grew bright and his voice caressed the spectacle. "It was in the Vienna woods, the same that had inspired Johann Strauss."

IN AMERICA Mr. Lee did not allow his memories to cloud his future. His is the kind of temperament that must be continually at work organizing and planning. Shortly after his arrival in America he was approached by a committee familiar with his reputation to organize a benefit. He accepted, and the program, which included many of his personal friends, such as Emanuel Feuermann, Lotte Lehmann, Yehudi Menuhin and Rudolf Serkin, was given at Hunter College. It was here that President Shuster "discovered" Benno Lee. And shortly after this venture, Mr. Lee began his work as concert-director of Hunter College. This office, though quite usual in Europe, is not so common in America. But, with the help of the President, Professor A. Broderick Cohen, Chairman of the Committee on Adult Education, and Professor Walter Helfer, Chairman of the Music Department, this self-supporting venture came into be-

ing. Since its inception, the proceeds from all performances have gone to the Student Aid Fund.

Mr. Lee has found his place in America. "It is really a pleasure for me to work here at the college," he explains. "I like the atmosphere. And the girls appreciate the concert artists even more than I thought." He has no desire to return to Vienna. The Vienna he knew is dead and his last memories of it are still terribly vivid. His alliance is with Vienna's past, and he will continue to bring his experiences with this past to America. The inscription on President Shuster's photograph, which occupies the central position in Mr. Lee's "picture gallery," expresses gratitude for his accomplishments in this respect.

*"To Benno Lee,*

*With deep personal regards and  
with appreciation of his ability  
to transfer charm and helpfulness  
from Old Vienna to New York."*

### *Nature The Anti-Fascist — February Song*

*Spring, the Adonis God, will come  
And organize the dull earth, numb  
And tender from the snow.  
City pools will shine with tenements  
And in the city park ferments  
The cautious bud, the fruit.  
Now the machine, the darwin fate,  
Selects for death the animate  
And pockmarks life with hate.  
And in the fall between the dead  
Leaves, the dandelion head,  
Empty and crazed, survives  
Among the vegetable ghosts:  
Cain, bearing seeds through autumn mists,  
Birth-mad in Central Park.*

—NAOMI HOROWITZ