

The Story of the HUNTER COLLEGE CONCERT BUREAU

Norman Singer

This past January, at the time when it is customary for observers of the performing arts to compile a list of the ten best somethings of the past year, the senior music critic of the *New York Herald Tribune* decided to list the ten musical events on his rounds which stood out from the others among New York's vast musical offerings. To our understandable pleasure, two of these ten were events presented at Hunter College by the Concert Bureau. It is especially noteworthy that these events represented the old and the new aspects of the Bureau. One concert was an evening in the traditional Saturday night Assembly Hall Subscription Series which is now in its twenty-first season. The other concert was in the Janacek/Schubert/Stravinsky Series, a new series in the Playhouse, marking the expansion of the Bureau's activities. The same *Tribune* critic gave these chamber music concerts a special "award" for being the year's most interesting and rewarding idea in programming.

In essence, this outlines what the current aims of the Concert Bureau's activities will be: to carry on what the late Benno Lee created, a great artists recital series which is among the best of such series anywhere, and also to develop activities that will present new repertoire, or extend the repertoire; to present programs with a unifying theme, a line, a direction; and to develop new audiences whenever possible.

The Saturday night series is a product of Benno Lee's foresight and determination and of former President Shuster's enthusiasm and encouragement of the project. Benno Lee was born in Cairo of a Turkish mother and an Hungarian father. As a boy, he moved to Vienna where it was expected he would become a banker as had others in his family. Instead, he was attracted by Vienna's musical world and he later became one of the city's leading impresarios. When the Nazis took Vienna, Dr. Lee was imprisoned in a concentration camp, suffering greatly. After the War he came to the United States. The great singer, Lotte Lehman, introduced him to President Shuster at an evening in the Hunter Assembly Hall celebrating Austrian freedom. Lee drew the President's interest and attention, and it was to him that Dr. Shuster gave the

responsibility of starting a concert series at the College.

Dr. Shuster was probably the first to see the value of drawing audiences to the new Assembly Hall. The project was begun with no sure expectation of success, but in a surprisingly short time, from audiences that were pitifully small, the series grew to attract sold-out houses.

Among many attributes needed to run a concert series — careful planning, a zeal for detail, an ability to gauge audience desires — Benno Lee's greatest characteristic was his ability to attract — cajole is a better word, perhaps — the greatest artists to appear at Hunter. Two of the most enthusiastic supporters of the new venture were Lotte Lehman and the cellist, Emmanuel Feuerman, who appeared often in the early days of the concert series. As one looks over the roster of those who have performed in the Assembly Hall, it is difficult to think of great artists who are absent from the list. The first season began with five events: a lecture by Thomas Mann, and concerts by Vladimir Horowitz, Yehudi Menuhin, Jan Peerce and Mme. Lehman. The next year some of these were repeated and Ezio Pinza was added to the list. Subsequently, Heifetz appeared, in 1945, as did Rudolph Firkusny, Erica Morini and the New York Philharmonic under Bruno Walter. In 1946-47, Milstein, Rubinstein and Marian Anderson were included in the series; in 1947-48 Schnabel, Serkin, Isaac Stern, and the Boston Symphony under Koussevitzky; in 1949-50 the Philadelphia Orchestra, Casadesu, Kathleen Ferrier accompanied by Bruno Walter. New in 1950 were Regina Resnik, Hunter alumna, and Francescatti, Bjoerling, Melchior. Each year the series added great names to those others who returned to Park Avenue. From the small initial audiences, the number of ticket holders grew to twenty-five thousand for twelve concerts in the series. And there were frequent extras — a New Year's Eve gala or an occasional lecture. There are now more than eighteen hundred subscribers to the Saturday night concerts.

While this series has earned great acclaim and has contributed enormously to Hunter College's name, still it represents only one of many kinds of music making



Dr. Benno Lee

— that of the great star whose artistry may very often become more important than the music itself. Further, until the time of Benno Lee's death in 1961, the Concert Bureau itself was essentially an autonomous structure within the College, with its activities neither integrated nor coordinated with the other branches of the College. Nor did it reflect in any degree the opinions and judgments of the Department of Music. There were other important musical activities in the College — the Choir gave winter and spring concerts; the Hunter College Opera Association had made a very important place for itself in the musical world in New York. Consequently, in the process of seeking a replacement for Dr. Lee, it was decided to reorganize the Bureau's structure, at the same time expanding its scope.

At the present time, the Administrator of the Concert Bureau is also Chairman of the Committee of Assembly Hall and Playhouse Rental. The administrative responsibility of the Concert Bureau now includes musical programs presented by the College Choir and the Opera Workshop. A Concert Advisory Committee has been set up to determine the general policies of the public music program of the College, this Committee of seven including three members of the Department of Music.

In the past year the new programs of the Bureau have been operative in various areas. Chamber music has been represented by a complete cycle of the Beethoven Trios, the first performance of this cycle in New York in about twenty years. A series, still in progress, and receiving a great deal of attention, is on the Piano Sonata — five concerts and two Lecture-Recitals on the History of the Piano Sonata. A children's series, "From Distant Lands and People," presents foreign folklore troupes touring the United States in programs designed for adults but suitable for children — allowing for a Sunday afternoon family concert excursion. So far, Greek and Korean groups have

appeared, to be followed next season by Israelis, Germans, Scots and Japanese.

A series of five concerts marking the death of Rameau features concerts of chamber music by French composers, past and present. Two leading avant-garde composers, Boulez and Stockhausen, have given lectures and have been involved in concerts of their music.

Other concerts of chamber music will be given under the sponsorship of the Robert O. Lehman Foundation and will feature new and unfamiliar music. In all of these programs there exists some didactic purpose — carefully hidden in some cases, rather patent in others. Although these concerts take place in a college auditorium, the programs have to have more than the merely physical presence of an educational institution. The collegiate impetus needs to be made apparent in the programs themselves. New York is in many ways overflowing with musical offerings and for Hunter to enter this area and to be of service to the community, special points of view need to be presented by the College.

The exciting function now facing the Concert Bureau and its staff is to develop valid points of view, and then to express them through programs that will continue to add to the prestige of the College and its musical offerings.



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