American Music Review

The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music

Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

Volume XLIII, Number 1 **Fall 2013**

Everett Lee and the Racial Politics of Orchestral Conducting

Carol J. Oja, Harvard University

While researching a book about the Broadway musical *On the Town*, I quickly realized that the show's initial production in 1944 was remarkable for its progressive deployment of a mixed-race cast.[1] *On the Town* marked the Broadway debut of Leonard Bernstein, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Jerome Robbins. Its star was the Japanese American dancer Sono Osato, and its cast included six African Americans out of a total of fifty-four. Today, those numbers would appear as tokenism. Within the context of World War II, however, with a contentiously segregated military, detainment of Japanese Americans as "alien enemies," and racial stereotypes of the minstrel show fully in practice, *On the Town* aimed to challenge the status quo. Black and white males in military uniforms stood side-by-side on stage, modeling a desegregated military, and black men held hands with white women in scenes of inter-racial dancing. The show's intentional desegregation made a statement.

An equally important racial landmark occurred nine months into the run of *On the Town*, when during the week of 9 September 1945 Everett Lee, an African American conductor, ascended to the podium of the show's otherwise all-white pit orchestra. Previously, Lee had been the orchestra's concertmaster. In an era of Jim Crow segregation in performance, Lee's appointment was downright remarkable, and it has been followed by an equally exceptional career. His first wife Sylvia Olden Lee (ca. 1918-2004) emerged professionally at the same time as her husband, and their development as musicians was deeply intertwined. She ultimately became a celebrated accompanist and vocal coach, working with African American divas such as Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle.

Everett Lee with Reverend J. C. Olden, Civil Rights leader and father of Lee's first wife, Sylvia Olden Lee
Courtesy of The Courier-Journal and courier-journal.com

While considerable attention has been directed to the racial desegregation of jazz, far less scholarship has focused on how the process unfolded in New York City's classical-music industry and in musical theater. Key moments stand out—such as Todd Duncan's debut with the New York City Opera in 1945 or Marian Anderson's debut with the Metropolitan Opera in 1955, which was the first time that the famed company featured an African American singer on stage. The Met took this step at a shockingly late date. Among black conductors struggling with racial limitations, Dean Dixon was best known among Lee's contemporaries. Both conductors faced a climate of "orchestrated discrimination," as the Civil Rights leader Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. once rued the stubbornly slow desegregation of American symphonies, and they devised resourceful strategies to keep working.[2]

Here, I explore the central outline of Everett Lee's career, which offers an inside view of racial segregation's impact on gifted black performers. I was fortunate enough to have two extended telephone interviews with Lee at his home in Norrköping, Sweden, where he continues to thrive in his nineties. Added to that, the digitization of historically black newspapers has opened access to valuable information about the world in which he was launched.

Everett Lee (b. 1916) grew up in a middle-class family dedicated to his development as a musician. The wild card was race. Born in Wheeling, West Virginia, Lee moved with his parents to Cleveland in 1927 as part of the Great Migration.[3] His father, Everett Lee, Sr., climbed up through the civil service, achieving leadership roles in largely white contexts and providing a model for his talented son. During WWII, the elder Lee became Executive Secretary of Ration Board 11 in Cleveland and was credited with inaugurating "a system of making the rationing program fit the individual, [which] stamped out all discrimination involving race or riches."[4] As a teenager Everett had a job at a local hotel as an elevator operator and busboy. There, he met Artur Rodzinski, conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra. "And Rodzinski," Lee recalled in one of our interviews, "somebody told him that this kid is a very promising musician, and he just asked me 'who are you,' and I told him, and he said, 'well, come to my concerts.' Every Saturday I could go to the Cleveland Orchestra concerts."[5] Rodzinski became central to Lee's development. "My early conducting aspirations were nurtured by him," Lee told a reporter from the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1948. "Rodzinski helped me in many ways—he would go over scores with me and give me pointers."[6] During this period, Lee studied violin at the Cleveland Institute of Music, a historically white conservatory, where he was awarded a Ranney Scholarship and his primary teacher was the famed violin virtuoso Joseph Fuchs.[7]

Lee enlisted in the military in June of 1943, becoming an "aviation cadet at the Tuskegee Army Air Field."[8] He was released early because of an injury and recruited for the pit orchestra of the all-black show *Carmen Jones*, which included a new libretto by Oscar Hammerstein II and a new arrangement of Bizet's score by Robert Russell Bennett. "To the right of renowned conductor, Joseph Littau," reported the *New York Amsterdam News* in late January 1944, nearly two months into the show's run, "sits the concertmeister, in this particular instance a young man of comely appearance, with a face that brightens and shines when you talk about music, and probably the only Negro ever to have held that title."[9] The rest of the orchestra was white, with the exception of the black jazz drummer William "Cozy" Cole, who also appeared on stage.[10] Very quickly, Lee's talent was recognized, and he substituted as a conductor of *Carmen Jones* even before his debut with *On the Town*; he also had a brief conducting opportunity with a revival of *Porgy and Bess* in the spring of 1944.[11]

Lee's appointment as music director of *On the Town* put him fully in charge of a Broadway pit orchestra for an extended period. In an interview with the *Daily Worker* in October 1945, Lee praised *On the Town*, saying it "has done some splendid pioneering work on Broadway." Beth McHenry, reporter for the *Worker*, expounded on Lee's statement:

> What he referred to particularly, he said, was the integration of Negro artists with others in the cast of *On The Town*, not in the usual 'specialty number' category but in the regular assembly of dancers. Mr. Lee attributes this to the honest and democratic ideas and efforts of the musical's authors—Betty Comden and Adolph Green and to the cooperative efforts of the whole cast. He himself was urged to come to this show by Leonard Bernstein, the composer.[12]

In the mid-1940s, even as *On the Town* was still in its run, Lee was also on the rise within top-flight, predominantly white institutions of classical music. He was one of the soloists in Vivaldi's Concerto for Four Violins, performed in late February 1945 by the New York City Symphony, conducted by Leopold Stokowski. Another violinist that evening was the renowned Roman Totenberg, which signals the level of Lee's virtuosity.[13] As segregation was challenged, interracial networks began to form. In Lee's case, Rodzinski probably recommended him to Stokowski. Based in part in their shared Polish heritage, Stokowski had been responsible for bringing Rodzinski to the United States as his assistant in 1925. Furthermore, when Rodzinski left Ohio in 1943 to become conductor of the New York Philharmonic, he hired Bernstein as his assistant conductor.[14]

Bernstein and Lee continued to work together after *On the Town* closed. In the summer of 1946, both Everett and Sylvia Lee attended Tanglewood, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the Berkshire Mountains. "Lenny talked to Koussevitzky and I got the Koussevitzky scholarship, and I was up at Tanglewood," Lee recalls, "and boy that was a wonderful experience."[15] There Lee not only studied conducting with Koussevitzky, but also worked with Boris Goldovsky in the opera department.[16] Just as importantly, he observed Bernstein prepare the American premiere of *Peter Grimes* by Benjamin Britten. The summer at Tanglewood was equally valuable for Sylvia Lee, who served as technical assistant to Goldovsky, which meant she helped coach singers and apprenticed with one of the great opera directors of the day.[17] From late September through October 1946—right after the Tanglewood experience—Everett Lee played first violin for the New York City Symphony, which Bernstein continued to conduct (through the 1947-48 season).[18] But his engagement with the orchestra was limited. "I wish I could be playing with you," Lee wrote to Bernstein, "but . . . it would be impossible for you to release me when my promised show comes up. Of course you understand how important that is with jobs so scarce!"[19] At some point in the late 1940s, Lee was also a staff violinist with the CBS Orchestra.

Lee faced formidable obstacles. In an interview decades later with the *New York Amsterdam News*, he recalled asking Rodzinski for an audition with the New York Philharmonic. This occurred at some point between 1943 and 1947, when Rodzinski was the orchestra's music director. "He was afraid to encourage me to try because he didn't want me to be hurt," Lee told the *Amsterdam News*. "He knew that I would not be accepted into the orchestra. This was one of the factors which helped me decide to try conducting."[20] This episode offers a revealing glimpse of Lee's resilience: when told that an opportunity was closed to him, he turned around and aimed for a higher rung on the ladder.

Taking matters into his own hands, Lee formed the Cosmopolitan Symphony Society, an interracial orchestra, in New York in 1947. Other outsider conductors have implemented the same strategy, including Dean Dixon in the 1930s and Marin Alsop in the 1980s. Lee's Cosmopolitan Symphony included "Americans of Chinese, Russian, Jewish, Negro, Italian and Slavic origin," as well as several female players.[21] Women were also systematically excluded from American orchestras during this period. The resounding success of the Cosmopolitan Symphony demonstrated not only Lee's musical gifts but also his organizational skill and flair for attracting an audience. The orchestra had a civil rights mission at its core, as the *Amsterdam News* reported:

> The working together of various races for mutual sympathy and understanding has been successfully accomplished in churches, choral groups and other endeavors, and this effort to combine highly competent musicians in a grand orchestral ensemble as a cultural venture deserves the support and good will of every faithful adherent to the principles of our democracy.[22]

"My own group is coming along fairly well, but of course there is no money in it as yet," Lee wrote to Bernstein. "I hope to make it grow into something good however, and it may be the beginning of breaking down a lot of foolish barriers."[23] Musicians' Local 802 assisted the Cosmopolitan Symphony by waiving its rates for rehearsals. Lee had to pay union scale for performances, however.[24] The orchestra rehearsed in the basement of Grace Congregational Church in Harlem through the aegis of its minister, Dr. Herbert King. Sylvia Olden Lee was organist at the same church, and her father James Clarence Olden was a Congregational minister in Washington, D.C. Everett recalls that James Olden provided a crucial link between Grace Congregational and the Cosmopolitan Symphony.[25]

The first concert of the Cosmopolitan Symphony Society took place at the Great Hall of City College in Harlem on 9 November 1947. "A capacity audience" that reacted with "enthusiasm and unstinted applause" to this "cultural effort which has such historic implications," reported the *Amsterdam News*.[26] The concert blended

standard European symphonic literature (Beethoven's First Symphony) with an aria and recitative from *La Traviata* performed by the black soprano June McMechen. *Five Mosaics* by the African American composer Ulysses Kay received its premiere, and Sylvia Olden Lee was the featured soloist for Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor (first movement).

The Cosmopolitan Orchestra gave a notable concert on May 21, 1948 at Town Hall, a midtown concert facility noted for its egalitarian policies. The *New York Times* covered the event, which was unusual for the time for any concert of classical music that involved black musicians, praising Lee as a conductor "who possesses decided talent" and the orchestra as a "gifted group."[27] Like Lee's first concert, this one blended European classics with a new work by Kay, *Brief Elegy*, and included black soloists. Concerts by the organization continued at Harlem churches, and another at the Great Hall of City College in 1952 yielded the orchestra's "finest performance," according to Nora Holt, classical music critic for the *Amsterdam News*. Described as "thrilling" by Holt, that event played to a "sold-out audience" of 2,100 "uptown music lovers."[28] During this period, Lee conducted elsewhere as well, including for the Boston Pops in July 1949, albeit as part of its "traditional Colored American Night."[29]

Navigating a career in the United States "was a struggle," Lee told me in an interview. He recalled a sobering conversation with the famed lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II:

> First as a violinist, that's how I first made my name, made a splash. Made concertmaster of two orchestras, and then getting on staff at CBS. . . . And then I began to conduct, and naturally my name spread around like fire. And I remember when . . . Oscar Hammerstein had a big party, and I don't know whether it was at his home or Richard Rodgers's home. And so everybody in the musical world was there, both from the Broadway world and classical world. And so Oscar said, 'Everett, come in here, I want to talk to you.' He said, 'Everett, we've got to explain something to you.' So we went into another room, and yeah it was at Rodgers's home – apartment. He said, 'You know, Dick and I.' Dick, you know, Richard. 'Dick and I have talked about you, and you know we have so many big shows going. We thought to bring you in on one, but you would be the boss. We were going to, we had talked about putting you on the road, sending you on the road with one of our big shows. But you're too well known. If a colored boy is the conductor, and we go into the South, we would lose, we would not be—they would deny our coming in. But I want you to know, Everett, that we had thought about you, and we had planned one of our big shows.[30]

In other words, Lee had achieved enough success so that his name would be recognized in Jim Crow territory, and according to the warped racial logic of the day that meant he was too accomplished and well-known to be hired.

More barriers appeared. Based on the success of his Town Hall concerts with the Cosmopolitan Symphony, Lee approached Arthur Judson, the foremost concert manager of the day, hoping to get work as a guest conductor with established orchestras. Judson managed the New York Philharmonic and the Philadelphia Orchestra, as well as other major American concert organizations and virtuosi. Sylvia Lee recalled what Everett told her about the interview: "Judson turned and said, 'Oh, come in, young man. I'm reading these reviews. They are out of this world. You really have something. But I might as well tell you, right now, I don't believe in Negro symphony conductors. . . . No, you may play solo with our symphonies, all over this country. You can dance with them, sing with them. But a Negro, standing in front of a white symphony group? No. I'm sorry."[31] Everett reported to Sylvia that he was "stupefied," adding that Judson concluded, "I'm sorry, young man. I told the same thing to Dean Dixon." Everett responded by saying, "Yes, Dean Dixon had to *leave his country* to be a man and a musician." Judson then suggested that Everett consider going abroad.

In 1952, Everett and Sylvia Lee did just that, receiving Fulbright fellowships to study in France, Germany, and Italy, and their departure marked the first stage in Everett's career-in-exile. This strategy was chosen by many African-American performers after World War II. When the Lee's left the country, the Cosmopolitan Symphony came to an end.[32] The couple returned to the United States one year later in what turned out to be a temporary step. In 1953, Everett was guest conductor with the Louisville Orchestra, in what the *New York Times* claimed to be "one of the first concerts in which a Negro has led an orchestra of white musicians."[33] The concert was not part of the orchestra's regular season but rather was billed as a "special" event, outside of the subscription series.[34]

Other major breakthroughs took place for both Everett and Sylvia Lee in the early 1950s. In 1953, Sylvia was hired by the Metropolitan Opera's Kathryn Turney Long Department, and she was credited as the first African American on the Met's staff.[35] As a result, Sylvia was in residence when Marian Anderson made her Metropolitan Opera debut. Both she and Everett developed a close working relationship with Max Rudolph, a conductor and central figure in the Met's management. In 1955, another major development occurred when Everett conducted *La Traviata* at the New York City Opera, becoming "the first Negro conductor to be engaged by the company," according to the *New York Times*.[36] He went on to conduct *La Bohème* with City Opera the following fall.[37] In 1956, he reportedly signed a contract with the National Artists Corporation, one of the most influential management companies for American musicians.[38]

Everett Lee conducting the Louisville Orchestra in 1953 as published in Jet, *October 1, 1953*

Yet Lee still became an expatriate. Beginning in 1957, he and Sylvia moved to Munich, where he conducted the opera and founded the Amerika Haus Orchestra.[39] That same year, Leonard Bernstein was appointed conductor of the New York Philharmonic, yielding a sharp contrast in the trajectory of their careers. In 1963 Lee became music director of the symphony orchestra in Norrköping, Sweden, southwest of Stockholm.[40] Dean Dixon had conducted the Gothenburg Symphony in Sweden from 1953 to 1960, and Lee held his own Swedish post for over a decade, finding Sweden to be a place where he could make music without racial complications.

In 1965, Symphony of the New World was formed in New York City, and Lee became a central figure. An interracial orchestra, Symphony of the New World essentially picked up where the Cosmopolitan Symphony had left off. Out of eighty-eight "top musicians," it included thirty-six African Americans and thirty women.[41] Initially, Everett Lee, Henry Lewis, and James DePriest were the main conductors.[42] DePriest was the nephew of Marian Anderson, and Lewis was then married to mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, with whom he collaborated professionally. Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson also became one of the organization's principal conductors. When Lee returned to the U.S. to conduct the new orchestra in 1966, the *New York Times* reported that the engagement marked "his first appearances in this country since he conducted for the New York City Opera in 1956."[43] Once again, a Harlem church provided an anchor for the orchestra—this time, the Metropolitan Community Church.

Lee made his debut with the New York Philharmonic as a guest conductor on 15 January 1976. He was then sixty years old, and the concert took place on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. Similar to programming of the Cosmopolitan Symphony, the concert included Sibelius's Violin Concerto, Rachmaninoff's Third

Symphony, and *Kosbro* by the African American composer David Baker. Harold Schonberg of the *New York Times* gave Lee a positive if somewhat patronizing review, stating that he "conducted a fine concert" and "made good music without bending over backward to impress." While "a Philharmonic debut can be heady stuff," Schonberg concluded sardonically, "Mr. Lee . . . refus[ed] to be drawn into the temptation to give the audience cheap thrills."[44] This breakthrough for Lee occurred during the U.S. Bicentennial, when awareness of supporting African-American performers and composers was at an all-time high.[45] Bernstein was then the orchestra's Laureate Conductor.

In the ensuing years, Lee has continued to have a successful career working with orchestras around the world. During the 1940s and 1950s, when he built his reputation as a conductor and stepped onto major stages in Europe, American conductors were absent from podiums in the United States, no matter what their race. For a conductor of color, however, barriers defined the game. No prominent African American conductor of classical music from the generation born before 1925—not Dean Dixon, not Everett Lee—was permitted a sustained position on the playing field. Yet Lee resiliently created opportunities for himself, essentially establishing his own league.

Notes:

[1] This article is drawn from my forthcoming book, *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* (Oxford University Press, to be published in 2014).

[2] Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., "Orchestrated Discrimination," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, 7 December 1974.

[3] Much of the biographical information in this paragraph comes from Joseph M. Goldwasser, "Where There's A Will, There's Everett Lee and Family," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 10 November 1945.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Everett Lee, interview with the author, 25 March 2009.

[6] "Everett Lee to Conduct Symphony: Town Hall Concert on May 21 Awaited," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 May 1948.

[7] Lee's scholarship is mentioned in many newspaper articles, including "Give Reception for Newlyweds," *Chicago Defender*, 26 February 1944.

[8] "Pilot's Wings are Sought by Violinist," *Chicago Defender*, 19 June 1943.

[9] Nora Holt, "Everett Lee, First Negro Concert Meister, Soloist in 'Carmen Jones,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 January 1944.

[10] Lee interview, 25 March 2009.

[11] Regarding Lee and *Carmen Jones*: "Violinist in 'Carmen' Hits for Another," *Chicago Defender*, 13 May 1944; and "Everett Lee Youngest Conductor on Broadway," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 June 1944. Lee's work with *Carmen Jones* is discussed in Annegret Fauser, "'Dixie Carmen': War, Race, and Identity in Oscar Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones* (1943)," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 4/2 (2010): 164. Regarding Lee and *Porgy*: Lee was reported as conducting the orchestra of *Porgy* "last week," in Constance Curtis, "New Yorker's Album," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 April 1944.

[12] Beth McHenry, "Everett Lee, First Negro Musician To Lead Orchestra in Bway Play," *Daily Worker*, 13 October 1945.

[13] "Stokowski Offers Concert Novelties," *New York Times*, 27 February 1945.

[14] The *New York Times* stated that Bernstein heard Lee conducting *Carmen Jones* "and engaged him to conduct his musical, 'On the Town'" (Ross Parmenter, "The World of Music: Season's Start," *New York Times*, 31 August 1947). Also, an article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* (8 May 1948), "Everett Lee to Conduct Symphony: Town Hall Concert on May 21 Awaited," credited Rodzinski with having "helped him [Lee] make useful contacts in the musical world."

[15] Lee interview, 25 March 2009.

[16] Wallace McClain Cheatham and Sylvia Lee, "Lady Sylvia Speaks," *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1 (Spring 1996): 201-202. This interview was also published in *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience*, ed. Wallace McClain Cheatham (The Scarecrow Press, 1997), 42-67. That same volume includes a terrific interview with Everett Lee (pp. 24-42).

[17] "Violinist, Wife in Joint Recital," *Chicago Defender*, 22 June 1946.

[18] Lee is listed as first violin in programs from the week of 30 September through the week of 28 October 1946 (*The Program-Magazine of the New York City Center* 4/4-4/9, Bernstein Collection, Library of Congress, Box 335/Folder 3).

[19] Lee, letter to Bernstein (perhaps in 1947), Bernstein Collection, Box 35/Folder 15.

[20] Raoul Abdul, "Reading the Score: Conversation with Everett Lee," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 October 1977.

[21] Regarding races and nationalities represented: "Everett Lee to Present Mixed Symphony Group," *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 October 1947. Regarding women: N.S. [Noel Straus], "Symphony Group in Formal Debut," *New York Times*, 22 May 1948.

[22] "Everett Lee to Present Mixed Symphony Group."

[23] Lee, letter to Bernstein, undated; Bernstein Collection, Box 35/Folder 15.

[24] The "cooperation" of Local 802 is noted in: "Everett Lee Organizes Interracial Symphony," *New York Amsterdam News*, 30 August 1947. Also Lee explained his arrangement with the union in an interview with me: "I asked the musician's union if I could just get a bunch of musicians together. The union gave me permission to rehearse these people. And of course with stipulations, there was no recordings, and if I were to have a concert, then I would have to, naturally they would have to be paid (28 March 2009).

[25] Everett Lee, interview with the author, 28 March 2009.

[26] "Cosmopolitan First Concert Wins Acclaim," *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 November, 1947.

[27] N.S. [Noel Straus], "Symphony Group in Formal Debut."

[28] Nora Holt, "Cosmopolitan Symphony in its Finest Performance: Sold-Out Audience of 2,100 Acclaims Lee's Production," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 March 1952.

[29] "Guest Conductor for Boston Concert," *Chicago Defender*, 2 July 1949.

[30] Lee interview, 28 March 2009.

[31] Everett Lee, as paraphrased by Sylvia Olden Lee, in "Dialogue with Sylvia Olden Lee," *Fidelio Magazine*, 7/1 (Spring 1998), http://www.schillerinstitute.org/fid_97-01/fid_981_lee_interview.html, accessed 18 January 2013. The remaining quotations in this paragraph come from the same interview.

[32] "Plan 'Bon Voyage' Affair for Everett Lee and Wife," *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 September 1952.

[33] "Negro to Direct in South: Everett Lee Will Conduct White Musicians in Louisville Concert," *New York Times*, 19 September 1953.

[34] This information comes from the program for the Louisville concert, as conveyed by Addie Peyronnin, Operations Assistant, Louisville Orchestra (email to the author, 18 March 2009).

[35] Sylvia Lee recalled that the Kathryn Turney Long Department did not allow women to work there during the main opera season, so Lee was employed for six weeks before the season and six weeks afterwards (Cheatham and Lee, 202).

[36] "City Opera Engages Two Conductors," *New York Times*, 10 February 1955.

[37] "New York City Opera Chores," *New York Times*, 22 September 1955.

[38] "Conductor," *New York Times*, 29 April 1956.

[39] "To Conduct UN Concert at Philharmonic Hall," *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 October 1966.

[40] Ross Parmenter, "The World of Music," *New York Times*, 8 July 1962.

[41] Sara Slack, "Symphony of the New World A Truly Integrated Group," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 March 1966.

[42] "New World Symphony Will Play," *New York Amsterdam News*, 17 April 1965.

[43] Raymond Ericson, "Two Elek(c)tras Come to Town," *New York Times*, 23 October 1966. In 1974, Lee became head conductor of the orchestra (Donal Henahan, "'New and Newer Music' Begins its Fourth Season," *New York Times*, 29 January 1974).

[44] Harold C. Schonberg, "Everett Lee Leads Philharmonic in Debut," *New York Times*, 16 January 1976.

[45] For example, Columbia Records issued its important "Black Composers Series" between 1974 and 1979.