

Reminiscence on Sylvia Olden Lee

The following is a statement from tenor, conductor, and keyboardist Gregory Hopkins, a longtime professional associate of Sylvia Olden Lee, on the occasion of the June 26 “birthday” musical tribute celebrated in her honor in New York. Mr. Hopkins currently serves as the Artistic Director for the Harlem Opera Theater.

I met Mrs. Lee when I was eighteen years old. I was a freshman at Temple University and singing in the put-together chorus of priests for Opera Ebony’s debut production of *Aida* in Philadelphia. Once we came together with the conductor, Everett Lee, who was her husband, she became the rehearsal pianist and coach. She heard my voice in the chorus, where I was marking the lead tenor in the rehearsals, and said: “There’s the voice.” I was assigned to sing the role of the messenger for the performances.

Several years would pass before I would encounter that dynamo again.

It happened when I entered Curtis Institute of Music. I resented being assigned to the Black coach, but quickly learned that Mrs. Lee was no ordinary instructor.

We established a relationship that went far beyond that of singer and accompanist. Whenever she played for me, she would never allow me to pay her. She would just repeat, “I’m just hanging around until you find someone who can really play for you.”

Mrs. Lee always stated that her name stood for “Save Young Lyric Voices In Advance.” So, certain repertoire she refused to coach. Once, I was in the finals of



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Gregory Hopkins, accompanied by Sylvia Olden Lee, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 2, 1993

a competition for dramatic voices. In a lesson, she darted: “Get someone else to play that; I refuse!” She meant business.

Eventually, I would earn keys to her home. Whenever I came by, she insisted that we work on material. For a moment of relaxation we would play Scrabble, sometimes into the wee hours, after which she would remind me that it was too late for me to drive home, and would insist that I bed down on the other twin bed that was in her bedroom. Mrs. Lee insisted that I always had to be learning something. You will never believe the words I learned while playing Scrabble with her. A true master of vocal repertoire, and a wonderful human being.

No one coaches like Mrs. Lee. Many a time she would command, “Now sing it again, more legato, and make me believe it”—and before I could finish the line, she would yell: “Phoney”!