

DAI-KEONG LEE

POLYNESIAN SUITE (1959)

SYMPHONY NO. 1 (1947)

Nürnberg Symphony Orchestra

George Barati CONDUCTOR

RECORDED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE ALICE M. DITSON FUND OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

HAWAIIAN-BORN DAI-KEONG LEE achieved initial prominence as a composer in the early 1940's, shortly after completion of studies with Roger Sessions, with Frederick Jacobi at the Juilliard Graduate School, and with Aaron Copland at the Tanglewood Berkshire Music Center. By 1942, the year in which the American Academy in Rome had awarded Mr. Lee its Bronze Medal for composition, his opera *The Poet's Dilemma* had been produced at the Juilliard School of Music and his first successful orchestral work, *Prelude and Hula*, had been premiered by Albert Stoessel at Chautauqua. Midway in that year, Mr. Lee's Hawaiian Festival Overture had been premiered at Lewisohn Stadium by Efrem Kurtz and the New York Philharmonic-Symphony. Just before enlisting in the Army, he managed to complete a CBS-commissioned Introduction and Allegro for Strings and Essay for Chamber Orchestra that was later re-titled *Golden Gate Overture*. Both scores received their first performances with Howard Barlow conducting the CBS Symphony Orchestra. The high point of D.K. Lee's early career came with the 1943 recording of RCA Victor of the *Prelude and Hula* by the National Symphony Orchestra of Washington, D.C. under Hans Kindler.

Military service by no means put a stop to Lee's composing activities; for during his tour of duty in New Guinea he composed two short orchestral pieces, an Overture in C and *Pacific Prayer*, the latter premiered by Leopold Stokowski and the New York City Symphony in 1944. Two successive Guggenheim Fellowships were awarded Mr. Lee upon his return from military service; and during the years after the War, he completed the definitive version of his First Symphony, composed a Violin Concerto and a String Quartet, both of which received successful public performances; and in 1952 the late Pierre Monteux gave the world premiere of his Second Symphony with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra.

By 1951, however, Mr. Lee decided to expand the scope of his creative work to include the musical stage in both its serious and entertainment aspects. After a spate of drama study at Columbia University, with special emphasis on musical prosody (this under Otto Luening), there came a commission from the off-Broadway Blackfriars Theater Guild to compose an opera based on the life of Mary Magdalene. The initial production on February 22, 1951 was extended to twenty-nine performances. Two one-act operas under the collective title, *Two Knickerbocker Tales* were also composed during this period; and in 1953, Mr. Lee achieved a genuine Broadway success with his score for *Tea House of the August Moon*. At this writing he has completed the musical score for another production intended for Broadway — *The Gold of their Bodies*, a Tahitian Musical Play based on the life of Paul Gauguin.

The two scores recorded here with the generous assistance of the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University were chosen with the deliberate intent of displaying both the light and serious side of Dai-Keong Lee's creative work.

Concerning the *Polynesian Suite*, Mr. Lee has provided some fascinating background information that applies as well to his other scores in regional South Seas vein.

"The most telling record of a people's intimate life," he notes, "is the record it makes unconsciously through its songs. This record which the Polynesian people have left of themselves is full and specific. Although they had no system of music notation, their music was handed down from generation to generation by memory in the form of dance-songs. Early Polynesian music, based on a primitive quasi-tetratonic scale, approached the great themes of life and death, ambition and jealousy, romantic and conjugal love, and the mysteries of the spirit and the hereafter; but it was not until the introduction of Calvinistic hymns by Christian missionaries that their music began to take on an entirely different profile. As a result, it became largely improvisational with a curious blending of tetratonic and diatonic scales — even at times a mere variation of a hymntune with Polynesian words.

"The turning point of Polynesian music, at least in terms of my own work, was the influence of an obscure German bandmaster, one Henry Berger, who was commissioned by King Kalakaua at the turn of the century to direct the Royal Hawaiian Band. As part of his singular task, Berger was faced not only with introducing Western music to the Polynesians, but also the whole apparatus of musical composition — harmony, counterpoint, etc. It was Berger who arranged the hymn-like *Aloha Oe* composed by Queen Liliokalani; and it was he who composed the Hawaiian National Anthem to the words of King Kalakaua. Although there had been earlier attempts on the part of missionaries, it was Berger who made it possible for native composers to notate their music on paper."

D. K. Lee's POLYNESIAN SUITE represents one of the most effective efforts to-date toward embodying both the popular and ethnic Polynesian musical idiom within the framework of Western art-music. The score was begun in 1958 and completed in 1959; and it was in connection with the 1960 celebration of Hawaii's admission as the fiftieth state in the Union that the Polynesian Suite was given its first performance by the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra under the direction of George Barati. The dedication on the score reads: "To Hawaii, in celebration, on her admission as the 50th State."

Mr. Lee summarizes the music's three movements as follows:

"*Ori Tahitian* — Tahitian Dance — is based on simple melodies from Tahiti. The dance is a fast, orgiastic ritual; the rhythms being in a fast duple meter, played on Tahitian wood block and other definite-pitch percussion instruments.

"*Hula* — literally, a story to be interpreted in dance — is slower and the dance more graceful. A simple duple rhythm is set by strings and percussion, over which is heard a tetratonic chant. This subsequently becomes the counterpoint for a diatonic hymn-like folk melody for strings.

"*Festival* makes use of chants from the pre-missionary era; but these have been altered through processes of inversion and other forms of attenuation, and the motifs were then couched in dorian and phrygian scales, accompanied with modal harmonies. From a formal standpoint, the movement stands as a free sonata-allegro."

Concerning his FIRST SYMPHONY, D. K. Lee tells us:

“Work began on the score during the summer of 1941, during a course of study with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood. Only two movements were completed at the time of the outbreak of War and enlistment for military service. However, the completed parts of the Symphony were heard in 1943 when the composer, on furlough from New Guinea, appeared as guest conductor of the Australian Broadcasting Company Symphony Orchestra at Sydney. Soon after leaving the Armed Forces in 1946, the Symphony was completed and Howard Hanson performed the work with the Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra on October 21, 1947. The score was later revised, and was first performed in its definitive version by Leon Barzin and the National Orchestra Association at Carnegie Hall in New York on January 8, 1951.

“The first movement, *Adagio con anima — Allegro con brio*, is a passacaglia and fugue — the initial theme being announced by the lower strings. The second movement — *Andante espressivo* — is in three-part song form; while the finale — *Allegro animato* — is a modified sonata-allegro that recalls early sections of the passacaglia movement. The close brings back the passacaglia motive in augmentation under high-string ostinato figuration.”

In connection with the Carnegie Hall performance of Mr. Lee's First Symphony, the observations of Virgil Thomson for the *New York Herald-Tribune* are worthy of note:

“The music does move forward and it moves in response to the composer's will. That will seems to demand that the music express his thoughts, his own real, personal and private universe. And surprisingly, it ends by doing so. This symphony exploits no technical ideas of experimental or advanced character. Neither does it indulge in demagoguery. It sings a lyric line and it declaims. And what it sings, what it declaims is personal poetry, not borrowed attitudes.”

GEORGE BARATI has played a key role in the musical life of Hawaii since 1950, at which time he was appointed Musical Director of the Honolulu Symphony Society. The success of his tireless work to develop the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra and the musical culture of what was to become the fiftieth state brought him an honorary doctorate from the University of Hawaii, as well as invitations to conduct all over the world. Before coming to Hawaii, Mr. Barati was known not only as a gifted conductor, but as a brilliant 'cellist and very promising composer; and in the years since, he has achieved recognition for his creative work fully on a par with what he has won as executant. As composer, Mr. Barati is represented by his 'Cello Concerto (1953) (CRI 184) while he has conducted for CRI the Halsey Stevens Symphonic Dances (CRI 166), as well as Gordon Binkerd's Second Symphony and Ulysses Kay's Sinfonia in E (CRI 139)

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)