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Dorati: 'A Far Higher Level'

By Paul Hume

Antal Dorati took over the music directorship of the National Symphony Orchestra five and a half years ago in the fall of 1970. At that time, which was a full year and a half after he had been engaged for the post, he said that he planned no major changes in the personnel of the orchestra but rather that he would work to bring out the finest playing of its members.

His success in the intervening years has been hardly less than sensational. In fact, it must be asserted that Dorati has served the orchestra far better than the orchestra's board has served in reciprocation.

While a minimum of changes in the players has occurred under Dorati, and these through death, retirement or resignation, the caliber and the character of the playing by the National Symphony has undergone changes that are as unmistakable as they are widely recognized.

Slowly but steadily, in those ways he has used with similar success with many other orchestras, Dorati, who returns to the podium this week after a hiatus in Europe, changed not only the musical achievement level of the National Symphony but its psychological attitude. Both were essential if he was to improve the orchestra as he envisaged. It would be wrong to

claim that one area of the orchestra's attainments progressed more rapidly than another. Rather, Dorati made immediate changes in the repertoire at the very same time that he polished the technical prowess of the players, all the while enhancing their tone.

It would be unfair not to recall that the National Symphony Orchestra, at the time that Dorati took it over, was bequeathed to him by Howard Mitchell in good enough condition that Dorati's improvements were possible.

But the players had become discouraged by a monotony in repertoire and depressed by an unjust and

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oppressive atmosphere that spread from the attitudes of the conductor, the general manager, and the board of directors of the years just prior to Dorati's accession.

While regular listeners to the National Symphony began to notice changes early in the Dorati era, the first strongly marked breakthroughs began to show up with regularity in his second year, when the orchestra moved to the new Kennedy Center. Overnight, the excellent acoustics of the Concert Hall gave the orchestra a texture and quality that was impossible in Constitution Hall. At the same time, critical notices for the orchestra's concert in New York City, which had for many seasons been nothing but a dreary repetition of the words, "routina, academic, dull, pallid," changed to "virile, intense, exciting, informed."

Following the psychological boost given by the opening of the Kennedy Center came word that Dorati and the National Symphony would begin to record for London Records, one of the world's most prestigious labels. Few conductors anywhere have made more recordings than Antal Dorati, and he had said quite matter-of-factly when he came to Washington that "Of course I will make recordings with the National Symphony." And so he did.

Within the past four years, seven London recordings have been released, in a repertoire ranging from standard and lesser known works of Tchaikovsky to contemporary compositions by three of the world's foremost composers: the late Luigi Dallapiccola and Roberto Gerhard, and Olivier Messiaen. The latter's "Transfiguration" was performed here and recorded with the composer present to give his stamp of approval to the entire proceeding.

It was a further mark of the growing prestige of the National Symphony that the U.S. premieres of such major works as "The Transfiguration" and Gerhard's "The Plague," could occur here, and that London Records, which practices the record business as well as any, would invite National Symphony performances of those works. Such a thing was unthinkable before Dorati's arrival on our scene. The orchestra's most recent release, "The Fun and Faith of William Billings," is one of its Bicentennial commissions, the work of Robert Russell Bennett, while two new recordings of music by Wagner and Debussy are due for release this spring.

Critical acclaim in record magazines and columns of this country and Europe have been unanimous in praising these National Symphony/Dorati records, and they are likely to win their share of major awards.

As the Dorati years continued, a growing fan club for the popular conductor emerged. Many of his admirers were amazed at the breadth of his musical interests and immense knowledge of repertoire. His completion of the recording of all the Haydn symphonies, his assistance in planning the Mozart and Haydn festivals in the Kennedy Center, and his own compositions continued to win him new praise. All this time the orchestra was sounding better, until people realized

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that, from week to week, they now took for granted a far higher level of performance at National Symphony concerts than had ever before been possible.

Suddenly there came the announcement that Dorati would move over, in the fall of 1977, from the post of Music Director to that of Principal Guest Conductor, and that his place as chief of the orchestral would be taken by Mstislav Rostropovich.

There was, naturally, vast excitement, for Rostropovich is one of the most magnetic, dynamic musicians in the world. His appearances as solo cellist with the National Symphony had been moments of special greatness for a number of years and his affection for the Washington orchestra was known. Despite the tactlessness with which the orchestra board handled this transition, Dorati hailed his successor, and made the point that he had been talking with the orchestra's board of directors for some time about the need for them to look for a successor to take his place when he decided to reduce his work load.

What needs to be said often, and with emphasis, is that if it had not been Dorati's tireless work with the orchestra, neither Rostropovich nor any other conductor of worldwide stature would have considered taking



on the National Symphony. This fact was underscored again during the recent spectacular concerts the orchestra played under the baton of Leonard Bernstein.

An orchestra can sometimes be said to "play over its head." But the kind of playing that Rostropovich and Bernstein and Dorati now regularly draw from the National Symphony is not possible on any sustained level unless an orchestra has become accustomed to operating that way the majority of the time.

Dorati is now returning to us again. On Tuesday night he will conduct the world premiere of Roy Harris's Symphony No. 14 for chorus and orchestra, after leading a performance of the Dvorak Cello Concerto with Rostropovich as soloist. That these two men together on the same platform will make great music is a foregone conclusion. But they could not do it if Dorati had not been successful in reaching some of his goals for the National Symphony.

Dorati is the first to insist that he has not done all that he hopes to with his orchestra. Not long ago he said that the orchestra is now so good, but can become better. And, with a kind of modesty that he uses when it is appropriate, he added that he, too, could get better and that he intended to. But there are still improvements possible, and more than possible, necessary, if the National Symphony is to be what some of its supporters now announce as their goal: equality with the greater orchestras of the world.

The board of directors of the National Symphony, who have worked wonders in financing their steadily growing pride and joy, have not yet realized the full dimensions of the

orchestral world they are now so near to occupying. Along with the good things they have done, they have, in signal ways and at critical times, failed, or worse, opposed the very man who has given them an orchestra capable of such elevated status.

The board of directors has interfered directly with Dorati's prerogative as music director in the choice of repertoire the orchestra plays. As Dorati brought credit to the orchestra and to Washington in his enlightened programming, some of the board complained at his selections. This is nothing new under the orchestral sun; Leopold Stokowski's boards tried the same thing on him in Philadelphia, but he told them to shut up or resign. Carrying his audiences with him in programs whose "modernity" would shock National Symphony subscribers today, Stokowski carried his battle. Dorati has perhaps been too polite with his board.

In the face of the prestige which the orchestra's recordings bring it, and the solid acclaim printed in reviews, it is hard to believe how hard Dorati had to work and beg before he succeeded, only last year, in finally having it understood that the National Symphony Orchestra MUST record regularly.

The symphony's board of directors like to talk about matching their orchestra with the world's best, yet they balk at every one of the major activities that the "big boys" take for granted. Having grudgingly agreed to the recordings, the latest fiasco brought about by the timidity of the more lagging members of the board was the disgraceful cancellation of the orchestra's proposed European tour. On February 23, the Boston Symphony is leaving for a quick, three-weeks tour of European capitals. The Chicago

Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Cincinnati Symphony, these orchestras tour Europe and the Orient.

For nearly four years past, European managements and Dorati had been working out the details of the National Symphony's tour, which would have taken the orchestra to festivals in Edinburgh, Lucerne, Athens, Berlin, Besancon, not to mention Paris, London and other capitals.

Mobil Oil had made a gift of \$50,000 and offered more, and the Greek government had taken over all the costs of transportation to Athens, the farthest point on the tour, and back. If the board of directors of the National

needs them or Washington. His concert and recording schedule in Europe is a full one. It is impossible not to think that for a time at least Dorati considered not returning here when the tour was canceled.

But Dorati emphasized the main point when he said that the orchestra was now so good that it could be still better. It is a mark of his deep concern for the ultimate betterment of his players that he is returning to carry them further along the road he has traveled with them for five and a half years.

Certain improvements are still vital to the ultimate goal of the orchestra and the board should move to secure them immediately. The string section needs to be enlarged. The Kennedy Center Concert Hall works best with orchestras that have nine double basses. (Los Angeles carries ten.) The National's eight are not sufficient, and when one of them is ill, as happened a week ago, the seven left are helpless. There should also be one or two more cellos, the same number of added violas.

It is now too late to reinstate the European tour, the loss of which is a disappointment to the players as much as to Dorati. But the board of directors must from now on move, as some of its more progressive members are already insisting, in positive ways and promptly, to firm up the aura of real greatness in an orchestra which they, in their flabby maneuvers, have, thus far, kept in a rickety condition. When an orchestra's conductors do all they can to give a public a great ensemble, the board's responsibilities have no excuse for not matching that achievement.

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Symphony has been effective in some of its money-raising work, no one could accuse it of being gracious in its dealings with the man who has put the National Symphony where it is today.

Just as the first announcement of the signing of Rostropovich to the post of Music Director was made when Dorati was in Europe, so was the cancellation of the European tour announced behind his back. What some board members still fail to realize, though the players affirm it regularly, is that the National Symphony Orchestra and its players need Antal Dorati far more than he

