

He Has Brought a Failing Orchestra New Life

By STEPHEN E. RUBIN

WASHINGTON, D. C. FOR too many years, under the unremitting glare of national scrutiny, there existed in Washington an orchestra of such embarrassing mediocrity as to make one's patriotic blood run cold. Today, that same orchestra has been jolted out of the doldrums and transformed into a respectable group. Only now, in its 43d year, is it perhaps worthy of the title National Symphony. Responsible in the main for the ensemble's much altered course is a 67-year-old American of Hungarian birth who, while no firecracker himself, is sort of a miracle worker when it comes to salvaging sinking

symphonic ships.

Wary of typecasting, Antal Dorati is loath to be dubbed an "orchestra builder," but there is no denying the facts. Earlier, in a diversified career, Dorati doctored the failing orchestras of Dallas, Minneapolis, London (BBC and London Symphonies) and Stockholm. Now, since 1970, he's put up his shingle in Washington. The prognosis, by the physician's own account, is splendid. "The National Symphony is a young first-class orchestra," Dorati says without hesitation. "You can put it anywhere."

Critics may not be as positive in their appraisals, but almost all agree that the ensemble has improved, is im-

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proving and boasts a future as bright as its past was dreary. It was particularly during the period from 1962 to 1970, when the orchestra was managed by M. Robert Rogers, that it suffered. Players in the National Symphony, interviewed at length by Richard Lee in the Washington Post, reported incidents of letters being received marked "opened by mistake," and general tyrannical practices that added up to what they referred to as "a reign of terror."

Coupled with the unhappiness over Rogers, there was the music directorship of Howard Mitchell (from 1949 to 1970), which left much to be desired artistically. A

former cellist who rose from the ranks to conductor, Mitchell was not overly popular with the players or the critics. His repertory was limited, and although it has been said that he did his "specialties" well, the consensus of opinion is that he was a better musician than a conductor.

Dorati, not interested in kicking dead horses, is careful in discussing the past situation. He admits however, "that there was a rather big managerial mess. Luckily, I wasn't involved. I dealt with Rogers only inasmuch as he engaged me. Then, all of a sudden, Rogers was out, and I was consulted about whom to engage to

replace him. They hit on a young man, William Denton, who was sent over to Europe to see me. I had confidence in him then, and I'm still glad to work with him. When he took over, there was apparently a very big change, but how big it was I cannot assess because I wasn't there before."

When Dorati took over as music director, he was familiar with the orchestra, having guest conducted it on many previous occasions, including his American debut in 1937. "This orchestra was never bad," he reports. "I used to be very skimpily treated with rehearsal time, but I came and did it, and it was never worse than

rather good. So I had the impression that the high potential here was somehow not developed. It was on this basis that I came here.

"What I did once I began was not to instruct them, but to let them flower, blossom. There was much more than I thought. The first two weeks alone must have been a great surprise to listeners and orchestra alike. It was a kind of free growth, a natural development. Later, I channeled that into the direction I wanted.

"We're now beginning our fourth year together, and there has never been a disagreeable moment, with either the orchestra, the management or the board—I swear to you. With an orchestra that is developing, the best thing to do is to let it develop naturally, not in a hurry.

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"What they have to do now is to get used to their own quality and to employ it better. The details are the everyday ones of workmanship, but the principle is to recognize the quality and perfect it. I will use my catalyst influence to prevent commonplace professionalism from getting the upper hand."

"I want this orchestra to have a basic repertory of the pillars of orchestral music at its fingertips. On that you can build constructively, introducing novelties and being exploratory. Every concert must have no less than four rehearsals. Eventually we will need more players. There are 96 now. I would like to have 15 more, but it will take time."

Last season, Dorati hired the National Symphony's first black associate conductor, James DePreist, who reportedly has already developed a large following in the black community. The orchestra had two black instrumentalists, one of whom left. Dorati, who claims there are not too many applicants among blacks, says, "I would never engage anyone anyway because he was black, white or pink. It's a question of musicianship. I'm completely free of prejudice either way."

Dorati's influence on the orchestra is obviously more than the catalytic one he refers to. These days, for a musical ensemble to put itself on the map it must have a slew of glamorous outer trappings. Dorati, who has been on the international scene for more than three decades, is able to secure them for the orchestra. Although he is by no means a superstar maestro, he does have a certain cachet and it has paid off handsomely.

Since his arrival, the music director has gotten his orchestra a contract with London Records, a planned tour of Europe in 1976 and, if all goes well, an opportunity to perform Wagner's "Ring" cycle with the Opera Society of Washington sometime in the near future. Today, Dorati and the orchestra are appearing together in New York, the first of their five annual concerts here.

If it looks as though the National Symphony has entered its halcyon days, why did the President of the United States invite the Philadelphia Orchestra to play at his inauguration last January? Wasn't that a slap in the face to Washington's resident orchestra and its conductor?

"Yes, it was sort of an insult," Dorati says. "But it was not very serious. I was annoyed for about five minutes. I do not think it was aimed at the orchestra. It was an oversight, a matter of manners. Musically, the choice cannot be criticized. I also think there is a personal relationship between Nixon and Eugene Ormandy. Nixon went to Philadelphia once to give him a medal."

By his orchestra's very presence in the nation's capital, Dorati is often placed in peculiar situations. Once, during a visit to the White House, the maestro politely asked the President what some of his favorite compositions are. Mr. Nixon cited in particular Richard Rodgers' background music for the film, "Victory at Sea."

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Dorati was not offended. "Why should the President of the United States be a music lover?" he asks seriously. "It's not his business. I thought his remark was very sweet, one of the most charming statements he ever made. It was frank—there's nothing wrong with that. In human history, there was only a handful of heads of state interested in the arts, and one of them was Nero.

Yes, it would be nice if the President were a music lover, but it would not make him a better or a worse president."

Although Dorati "wouldn't know how" to become involved in politics, he finds himself unable to ignore the current turmoil in Washington. "It's horrible, really horrible," he exclaims. "This is a very sad moment in the history of the country. The moral aspect is very serious. But once I understand this, my only attitude can be that I will do honor to my job, dammit!"

His job, he feels, might be more easily accomplished if the government recognized what he terms its "moral connection" to the National Symphony. Despite its "national" title, the orchestra must get along financially the way most of its brethren do—primarily through ticket sales and gifts. This year, for the first time ever, gifts reach the million dollar mark. All this notwithstanding, Dorati feels, "The maintenance of cultural assets in American cities is taken care of by the biggest private enterprises. What is Washington's biggest enterprise? Government. There's no two ways about it. So government subsidy to the National Symphony does not fall under the same heading as government subsidies for the arts in the United States. They're two different issues."

Dorati is comfortably ensconced on a couch in his colorful suite at the Watergate Hotel talking easily in a Hungarian-accented idiomatic English. He is more imposing than handsome—tall, wiry, gray-haired, bespectacled and a dapper dresser in a long, tan Edwardian sports coat, gray slacks, checked shirt and a narrow, multi-colored woolen tie. He shows no signs of fatigue even though the night before at the Kennedy Center he had conducted the season's opening concert, received a standing ovation following the Mahler Fifth Symphony, gone to a black-tie party at a local art gallery, stayed beyond 1 A.M., and was up early in the morning for a breakfast meeting with his manager. Like so many of his conductorial colleagues, Dorati's energy level appears to increase as he gets older.

He claims to be in perfect health and becomes visibly annoyed when I ask him about the heart attack he was supposed to have suffered a few years ago in Europe, which was reported in a Washington newspaper. "Ah," he grunts, "I never had a heart attack. I was ill with an entirely different thing. My heart is very good, and my blood pressure is 125 over 80."

That Dorati does not reveal what it was he suffered from is symptomatic of his almost legendary refusal to discuss any aspects of his personal life. He is surely entitled to his privacy, but his stubbornness can become frustrating.

For instance, in the midst of discussing his theory that a conductor's talent is less a matter of music than of leadership, Dorati says, "A real leader can make another person, of his own accord, do what he would like him to do. I have always had a good influence on orchestras even



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in those times when I had bad manners. Why? Because of the utter and complete sincerity of what I am doing. It might also be combined with a way of expression, whether amiable or not, that will make the point. Now, I have an even better influence because I have better manners.

"I used to blow up enough to label me as a disagreeable person, and I got the reputation of being a very angry man."

What was it that caused him to mellow? "Life." Was there no striking and dramatic incident which enlightened him? "Yes, there were several." Tell me about them. "No, that's private. There you've got to go hungry."

Dorati, who became an American citizen in 1947, has been wed twice. His first marriage in 1929 to Klara Korody, which produced his only child, Antonia, a stage designer, ended in divorce several years ago. Recently, he wed the young Austrian pianist Ilse von Alpenheim, who is his soloist in today's concert at Fisher Hall. The couple has three residences—in Washington, in Stockholm, where he is chief conductor of the Philharmonic, and in St. Adrian, Switzerland.

While busily "doctoring" symphony orchestras, Dorati also found the time to complete more than 300 disks, making him one of the most widely recorded maestros in history. His repertory, as in live performances, is unusually varied, and even includes a symphony and chamber piece by the composer Dorati.

Washingtonians will be able to hear what the music director sounds like as composer when the National Symphony performs his 1954 oratorio, "The Way," next April. Yet another novelty, coming up on Tuesday, will be the world premiere of Marvin David Levy's oratorio "Masada," about the Jews' taking over King Herod's stronghold in 70 A.D. and for three years fending off the Roman legions. Richard Tucker will be tenor soloist.

Dorati has reached a point in his life where he is sure of himself, whether he is playing conductor or composer. "I'm a late developer," he says. "I was a child very long, and I'm much younger than my years. My artistic development is geared to a biblical age which I will, of course, not achieve. My only complaint is that I probably will die before I will be as good as I can be."

"In a way, though, I'm glad that I'm as old as I am for the National Symphony. With a developing orchestra, the best thing to do is not to hurry. Who knows, maybe 20 years ago, I would have been too impetuous. You know, local people here have asked me whether my aim is to make this orchestra the National Symphony."

"In Washington, everything is national, even National Shoeshine. If these people think that I want to put the Big Five orchestras out of business, they should go to an insane asylum. But if they mean that I should help to make this orchestra represent American music with the greatest dignity at any given occasion, I not only want to do that, I have done it."