

Ovations For Dorati

By Joseph McLellan

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On the whole, standing ovations are probably overdone in our time; a tenor manages to crank his voice over the top of the treble staff, or an orchestra plays something loud and fast and manages to finish it all together and there is always someone willing to jump up and shout "bravo."

(Connoisseurs of a certain kind lie in wait for sopranos so they can shout "brava," instead, accenting slightly that exquisitely correct final vowel.) Such enthusiasm is commendable, no doubt, but for the standing ovation to have meaning, it should be rationed—perhaps to one per month.

However, there were two standing ovations last night in the Kennedy Center Concert Hall, one at the beginning and one at the end of the National Symphony's program—Antal Dorati's

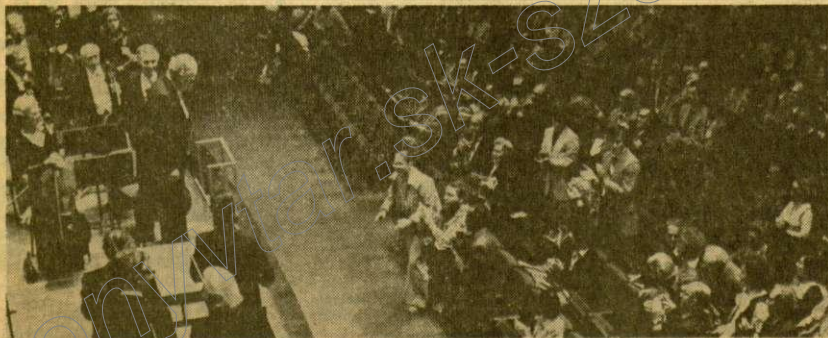
final program as its music director. Anything less would have been shamefully inadequate.

The first one, given before he had conducted a single note of the program was obviously for what he has done here in the last seven years, and if allowed to continue to its proper length it would have delayed the concert for hours. The second one, at the end, was for what he did last night, a fine summing-up of his work with the orchestra.

The final ovation grew naturally out of the applause that comes automatically at the end of a concert; the first one began spontaneously, raggedly, when Dorati came onstage for the first time. First, there was one man standing to applaud, halfway

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Antal Dorati's farewell by Tom Allen-The Washington Post



down on the left side of the Concert Hall; then others began to rise in small groups until the whole packed auditorium was on its feet.

Dorati stood for several minutes, facing the audience silently, his head bowed, his hands gripping the rails around his podium. Finally, he turned to the orchestra, clearly ready to conduct, and the applause tapered off, the music began—a soft, elegiac viola melody whispering out of nowhere.

It was a curious occasion, a celebration and a farewell; the crowd (considerably larger than the usual Tuesday night audience) was a bit more subdued than normal until ovation time when it cut loose. Conversations overheard during the intermission seemed less random, more concentrated on the departing maestro and his years in Washington.

True, Dorati will conduct this orchestra frequently in the years ahead; he will be specially welcomed, and there will always be a bond between him and this city, this orchestra. But being a principal guest conductor is still different from being a music director—like living in a hotel suite rather than your own home.

Characteristically, this final concert included a first performance for the National Symphony—the Adagio and "Purgatorio" movements from Mahler's autumnal, unfinished Tenth Symphony, an exquisite choice. The first of these movements is "farewell" music in the highest degree—a farewell to life itself from a composer who knew he was dying when he wrote it. It does what one might consider impossible; it picks up, in tone and feeling, where the haunting finale of "Das Lied von der Erde" (which is really Mahler's Ninth) leaves off and it goes into even deeper regions of the pain of parting.

The remainder of the program was filled with Mahler's brilliant Fifth Symphony, the composer as conductor exploring every resource of the orchestra. It is a splendid parting choice for a conductor who wants to say, in effect: "Look; this is my orchestra and this is what it can do." A program like

this would have been foolhardy when Dorati first came to Washington. Its success last night summed up his stay here neatly.

Perhaps I'm a sentimentalist; I would have liked the program to include a work of Haydn, a composer with whom I have come to associate Dorati specially in recent years. In fact, I would have liked Haydn's "Farewell" symphony, with the players tiptoeing offstage one by one in the last movement as their music ends until the conductor is left alone with a pair of violinists—but, of course, that would not have used the full orchestra and it would have been awkward getting everyone back out for the final bows.

But there is a point here beyond that of sentiment and stage spectacle: that Dorati's relation to the National Symphony has been very much like that of Haydn to the symphonic form. It was there before he began working with it, but he was the first one to realize and demonstrate what it could become.

Otherwise, Mahler was an excellent choice—a conductor first and a composer in his free time as Dorati is, and a master of orchestral technique surpassed by none. The Fifth Symphony has a bit of everything, wit and pathos; towering climaxes and a prevailing texture close to that of chamber music—which means, for the performers, cruelly transparent, allowing no margins for error.

Technical lapses were few and slight; the orchestra responded to the music and the conductor with fine sensitivity and a real mastery of the music's nuances. It was slightly unfortunate, perhaps, that the concert had to open with the adagio of the Tenth Symphony music which needs to breathe, to move with a bit more freedom than this very correct first performance could muster.

It will certainly reach greater heights in the performances tonight, tomorrow night and Friday afternoon—all of which should play to packed houses if Washington knows a rare musical event when it happens.