

# Potomac

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## Antal Dorati:

A look at the man remodeling the National Symphony

The Men Behind the Candidates, Pt. II:  
McGovern's Guggenheim and Agnew's Goodman

Fashion: the Irish Cape

# A look at, a talk with Antal Dorati ... the symphony surgeon

By Aileen Jacobson

*Antal Dorati was brought in as musical director of the National Symphony two years ago to make it good. He has had a career of reviving dispirited and fallen orchestras, lifting their morale and their musical quality. First, he did it with the Dallas Symphony, where he was musical director from 1945 to 1949, then with the Minneapolis Symphony (1949-1960), and with the BBC Orchestra in London, where he was chief conductor for several years. He has been serving as chief conductor of the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra since 1966, a position he still holds.*

*The orchestra members here are enthusiastic about Dorati. Concert Master Miran Kojian says, "He has tamed us, by curtailing us and making us play with detailing. We were playing wild before, without knowledge. Now we are more musical. He's an authentic musician. He's interested in the mood of the music, in what the composer wanted. He's teaching us to mold, weave, make music, not drive, drive, drive. I think you can sense that in the roundness that is coming out, in the transparency of our music now. We are no longer playing with the thick texture that we were putting out before."*

*Since he has been with the National Symphony,*

*Aileen Jacobson is a staff reporter with Potomac.*



*Dorati has introduced works the orchestra had never performed, emphasizing American music. During rehearsals, he has an exceptional rapport with his orchestra. He turns criticisms of individual performers into shared, if telling jokes, and often has the whole orchestra laughing at his unusual use of images and metaphors. "Don't play so nervously," he told them during one rehearsal. "The audience will bite their fingernails and then they will have nothing left to applaud with." Addressing one musician at another rehearsal: "You find this passage difficult? Well, luckily, there are only two performances." He is always thorough, yet relaxed.*

*Dorati made his conducting debut with the Budapest Opera at 18 and led that orchestra for four years. His father, first violin in the orchestra for 34 years, continued to play under his son's direction. In the '30s, he was conductor of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, and later with Ballet Theater. He also composes music and plays the piano. He is married to the Swiss pianist, Ilse von Alpenheim, his second wife. Dorati became an American citizen in 1947.*

*He first conducted the National Symphony in 1937, with several guest appearances in the following years. In 1970, he became the third man to assume its direction, succeeding Howard Mitch-*

*ell, who had been with the orchestra since 1949. Hans Kindler founded it in 1931.*

*Dorati's contract here, now extended through the 1973-74 season, calls for 14 weeks of conducting this season, though the number may be increased for following seasons.*

*In the following interview, he discusses some of his goals—for the orchestra and for himself—and reflects on the qualities of rapport between conductor and orchestra.*

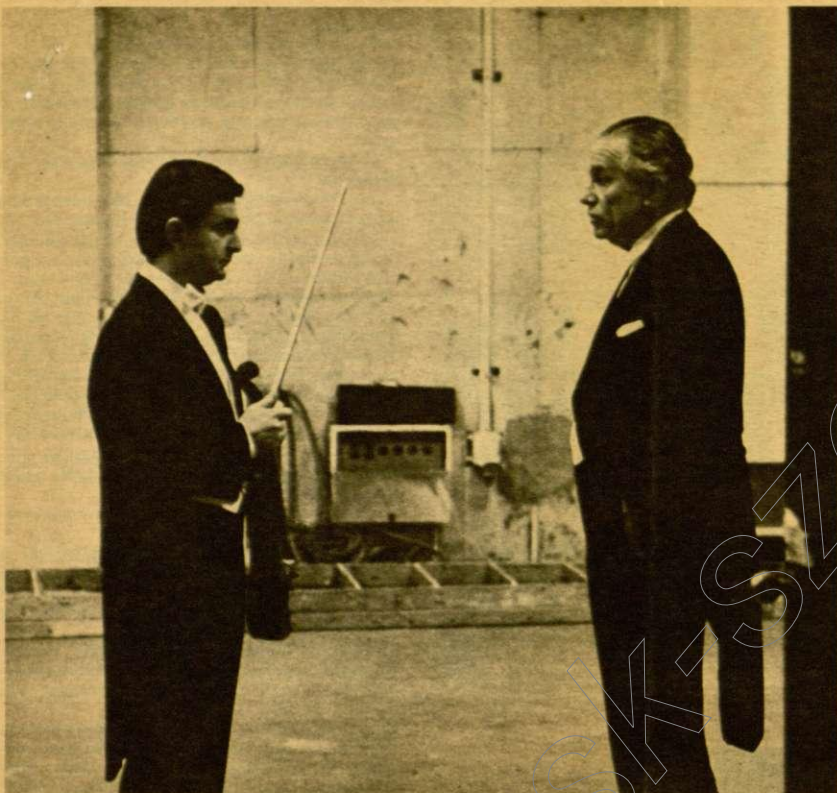
**What kind of progress has the orchestra made with you?**

I think the orchestra is very fine, but it isn't up to me to assess. It is up to my public and to the press. The public likes it. They applaud and they fill the hall in increasing numbers. And the critics say they like the music. They aren't stupid. If they didn't like it, they would say so.

**Do you plan to make any changes in the composition of the orchestra?**

I want the orchestra a little bigger. Perhaps one more first violin, one more horn. We'll continue little by little until we reach a big status. It's not feasible to give 200 concerts a year with the size orchestra we have now. And then, when we want,





National Symphony Concert Master Miran Kojian, conferring with Dorati backstage, says of him, "He has tamed us . . . He's teaching us to mold, weave, make music, not drive, drive, drive."

Below: Dorati conducts with guest soloist Robert Casadesu. The goal he has for his orchestra, Dorati said, is "beautiful sound, a profile of an orchestra. I'd like to achieve the National Symphony profile, its own sound."

we'll put them all up on the stage at once, and we'll sound sumptuous.

Are you reaching for any special goal with the orchestra?

I'm working toward an American year in 1976. I must plan as though I would be here then, though my contract does not extend that long. I would be a very poor musical director if I planned only to the end of my contract. Perhaps I will be here to carry out my plan, who knows? That year, the whole country should be playing American music, but especially the orchestra in the nation's capital. Of course, that does not mean we will be playing only American music. I plan to play a little bit from early times, so that we will hear what our grandfathers and our fathers heard, and some music from now.

Do you consider yourself an American?

I am an American citizen. But I consider myself a citizen of the world.

How do you like the Kennedy Center Concert Hall compared to Constitution Hall?

Ho, ho, ho, ho, this is marvelous and the other one wasn't. This is one of the great concert halls in the world. It obliges us to fill it with great music.

What of other musical goals?

The goal is beautiful sound, a profile of an orchestra. I'd like to achieve the National Symphony profile, its own sound. Of course, it will

be the sound that I like, since I am the director—an elegant sound, not overwhelmingly large. I don't like to make noise. Even in the strongest moments of passion, I want some elegance. I like muscular playing, but I also like the blending of tone, color, and rhythm. I want finesse, I want good taste—what the Italians call "squisitamente" (exquisitely). That's what I'm always trying to achieve with any orchestra, even if it did it before. Since you are still the conductor of the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra, and often make guest appearances, do you feel that you spend enough time in Washington?

No, I feel I don't spend enough time, but in fact I do. By and large, it is enough, though I hate to go away when it is going well.

There was a time when a conductor stayed with an orchestra month after month, but that time is over. No matter how great a musician you are, it becomes increasingly difficult to provide events. We have to give the audience and the players a special event each week. And each person has only so many rabbits to pull out of his hat. I provide relief for myself and relief for my audience when I leave. It is the same as when you are on a hill and you are looking at the horizon. If you stand on a higher hill, you will have a wider horizon. But no matter how high you stand, your horizon is still only a circle.

One must produce the infinite, and the infinite is variety, that is the way I define it. Like eternity is procreation. Everyone has eternity. I don't know why they worry themselves that they don't have it. If I have a son, and he has a son, I have eternity . . . No, I have a daughter and a grandson, just a few weeks old. My daughter lives in Rome. My home is in Switzerland.

Several critics and orchestra managers have said that, as a conductor, you have charisma. Do you agree?

Is it a good thing? Then I agree.

You were praised for a production of Charles Ives's "Holidays Symphony" at Constitution Hall last February in which you brought in a chorus from the back of the auditorium in street clothes. Do you plan any surprises like that for the Kennedy Center?

I will do something of a similar character, adapted to this hall. It will be a surprise, though, so I can't very well tell you what it might be. Surprises have to be rare. You can't live on surprises—but one or two are all right. It's like with people who make puns all the time. They are a bore. But to make one or two a day is all right.

How did you feel you were received by this orchestra?

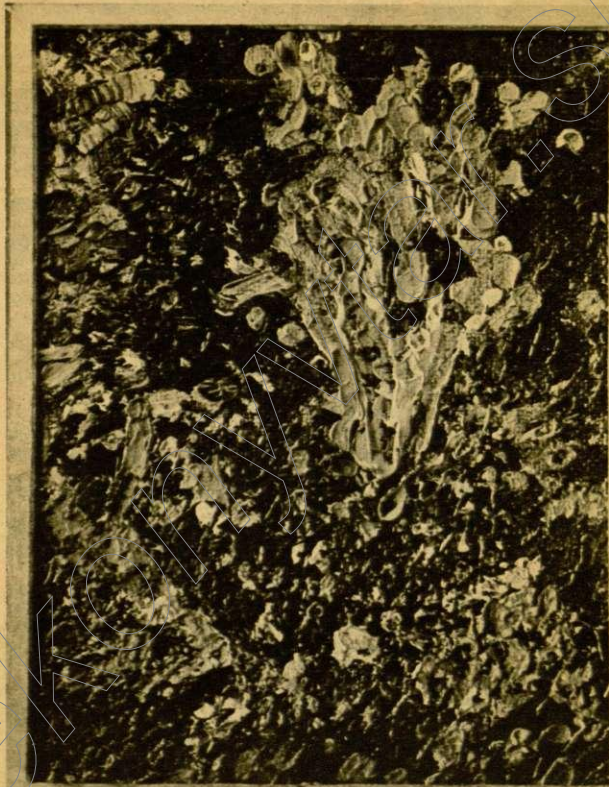
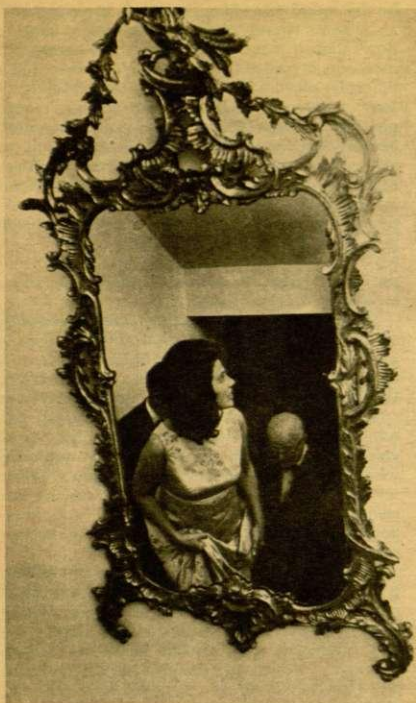
With great warmth. But I also gave great warmth. They were very friendly.

What is your job as conductor?

I must kindle the individual imaginations in the orchestra. My job is to augment, not to stifle the individual.

You know many languages. Do you learn them easily?

I know six languages—Hungarian, my native tongue, of course, and English, German, French, Italian and Spanish. I don't learn languages. I speak them in my own way. I don't make many mistakes in writing, though I have never studied a language. Because of my work, I have had to travel, so I learn the language. When I was a young man, I suddenly found myself in Paris, so I thought the best idea was to speak French . . . No, I didn't have to leave Hungary. I left before it became necessary. All this Nazi thing was not for me. I was a sensitive kid. Not knowing what was coming, I left. I had a feeling it wasn't right, and I also had wanderlust. And then I left again. I have started my life over many times. When I don't feel that I am starting over again, that is the beginning



ANTAL DORATI 1971

Dorati and his wife, Swiss pianist Ilse von Alpenheim, attend a Washington gathering together. Partly because of her, he doesn't perform on the piano himself anymore. "One in the family is enough."

Dorati paints during his vacations. This colorful painting belongs to David Kreeger. "He hung it in his dining room between the masterpieces. It was a nice gesture of friendship, but I told him it was not appropriate, that he should put it in some dark gangway, and take people to see it only if they want to."

of the end.

*What is your schedule on a typical day?*

In the morning, I like to compose, for two or three hours, or maybe only a half hour, when I get up. But if I work with an orchestra, rehearsal is at 10, almost as a rule, so I have no time to compose.

I have to study in the afternoon, of course—my repertoire.

... I do drawing and painting, but more or less only in vacation times. I take short vacations. My midwinter vacation is two weeks. In the summer, I take six weeks. At my age, I have to take a vigorous vacation. I walk or I swim every day. I study a little, or read, and I paint. Not abstract but sort of fantasy painting. David Kreeger has one of my paintings, and he hung it in his dining room between the masterpieces. It was a nice gesture of friendship, but I told him it was not appropriate to hang it between two Monets, that he should put it in some dark gangway, and take people to see it only if they want to. But he did that to please me.

For an amateur, I'm not so bad though. I've been drawing all my life, and I'm quite good there. But the painting is more recent.

*Do you plan to play the piano in any performance?*

I would have to practice. And besides, my wife is a pianist, and one in the family is enough. I do perform on the harpsichord. In the time of Haydn, Handel, Bach, they all performed on the harpsichord and conducted.

*You have a reputation for re-creating orchestras and lifting their morale: Dallas, Minneapolis, Stockholm, London. And you were brought here for the same thing...*

Each task is very different. I'm not an orchestra surgeon, though. Frankly, I think I'm a good musician. I'm a contagious man. I'm always very much there—I never give less than 100 per cent of myself.

*Do you feel you were successful with the other orchestras?*

When I left Dallas, my job was not done. In Minneapolis and at the BBC, it was done. In Sweden, the job is not yet done, but, then, I'm not leaving there. Here the job is not done either, but I'm not leaving. When I have given as much as I can give, then I hand it over to someone else. It's like the torch in Olympic running. One runner carries the torch, then hands it over to the next runner. The mileage is not precise—I might run 1 mile or 5 miles, just to the next étape.

*It is sometimes said that Washington is under the shadow of New York culturally. Do you feel that this is so?*

Everything is under a shadow if it puts itself there. If I put myself under a shadow, that is my doing. I have a feeling that it is a cheap excuse for keeping mediocrity. With a little more work, New York could be under the shadow of Washington. It depends on effort, on creative spirit, not on the number of people living in a city. If something is lacking, then people will find an excuse: It was too hot, it was too cold. There was an earthquake. There was no earthquake. Hemingway said it splendidly when he wrote that the writer can be recognized by only one thing: he writes. The non-writer can spend a lifetime explaining why he doesn't write. If we want to achieve in Washington, then let's do it. Otherwise, we'll spend years talking about why we don't.

*Do you like Washington?*

It is pleasant. I like the audiences very much. They are filling the halls, they like it, they come more every time.

*How old are you now?*

I'm 65 years young. I have secret plans for what I will do when I grow up.



1971 Sep

DORATI ANTAL

1972 Feb.

Washington, D. C.

6 db kiadvágat  
1 db boríték