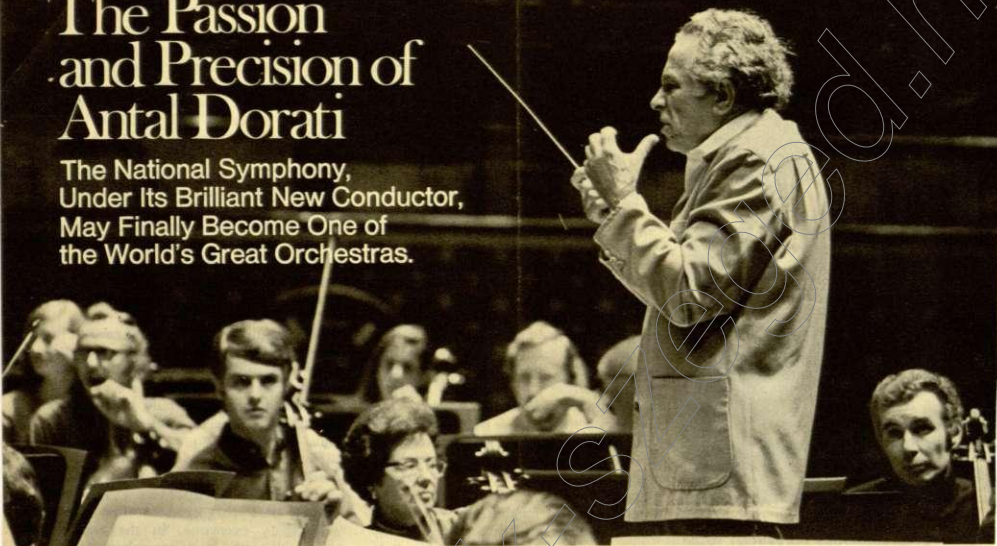


# The Passion and Precision of Antal Dorati

The National Symphony, Under Its Brilliant New Conductor, May Finally Become One of the World's Great Orchestras.



By Richard Lee

**B**ACK FROM EUROPE for a week to finish up his first season as music director of the National Symphony, Antal Dorati was coping with a formidably tight schedule. There was no time for an in-depth interview, it appeared. And he was flying off to London the next day and wouldn't be back in Washington until August 31, to start his second season.

But the maestro, nothing if not publicity-wise, offered a neat solution—we would talk in the car, enroute to a concert in Shippensburg, Pennsylvania.

I agreed to it, but not without some trepidation. Two hours with a temperamental Hungarian maestro—a touchy business under any circumstances. But trapped in a moving car, I asked the wrong question and would he order the chauffeur to stop, utter a few fiery Magyar oaths, and eject me forcibly? Out there in the middle of nowhere? I didn't want to think about it.

Fortunately, the interview started well. Maybe it was true, what his friend George London said about him: "He saves his temperament for the performance."

Seated there in white tie and a burgundy and black silk smoking jacket, Dorati looked every inch the maestro. Physically, he is cast in the heroic mold—tall and rather Old World handsome, with grey, wavy hair framing his strong yet sensitive face. In profile, he calls to mind busts of Beethoven. He exudes vigor and authority. Quite naturally, you find yourself deferring to him. Dorati had taken over as music direc-

tor of the National Symphony last October, and it was now almost a cliché that he was giving the orchestra a new lease on life. The musicians were in a state of euphoria over having a maestro of Dorati's caliber and international reputation to lead them—out of the cultural wilderness, as it were.

Critics and audiences were no less enthusiastic—even the *New York Times* was impressed when Dorati appeared there with the National Symphony in Philharmonic Hall: "The orchestra played with uncommon brio and purpose," wrote Donal Henahan, "and with a tonal homogeneity often missing in former years."

"This is a very good orchestra," Dorati was insisting as we sped through the Maryland countryside, "much better than its reputation. The talent, the material here is surprisingly high... each week, we knew each other better, and the talent unfolds more and more—it was like a flower unfolding—yes, that is what it was like," he smiled a pleased smile. "I can't say it any better."

"The first season was all too short," he continued, expressing regret that previous conducting and recording commitments prevented his spending more than ten weeks with his new charges. Some of his new charges expressed regret about it, too, but half of Dorati was better than no Dorati, they conceded.

Dorati will give them fourteen weeks the second year. Beyond that, it's open to negotiation. That's the way it is when you're a maestro in demand—you make

a lot of commitments years in advance and let from orchestra to orchestra to fulfill them.

"It's a whole new era, really," notes the symphony's new manager, Bill Denton, who was with the San Diego and Atlanta symphonies before joining Dorati here last year. "Maestros are too precious a commodity these days to expose themselves week after week in one place. They would no sooner do a full thirty-six weeks than stand on their head anymore. Nor would you, if you were in their shoes. Nor would I."

"The music director of an American orchestra literally has the whole burden of excellence on his shoulders," he went on. "Every single week, he goes before the public, all by himself, fully exposed, depending on his own talent, and it's extraordinarily demanding. We don't make any one other person do that. So, inevitably, if we want excellence, we must accept it on the terms it is offered."

Dorati planned no immediate personnel changes, but he would find out what he had soon enough—he was throwing new music at them left and right. It was quite a repertorial workout, the musicians said. They were leaving rehearsals tired, happy, and stimulated.

"I tried to give each program a strong face, a strong profile," he said. "Some were controversial, some worked better than others, some were a surprise—we put in an all-American program (Ives, Schuman, Copland) and it evoked tremendous enthusiasm... we had no idea it would go over so well."



He also had happy results with Bartok—"The Miraculous Mandarin" and "Concerto for Orchestra."

"I'm a good Bartok man," he admitted, "but it took me a long time to become a good Bartok man—longer than Bartok lived!"

But he resisted the suggestion that this music was his specialty. "My specialty is to be a nonspecialist," he smiled.

**W**hat about his vaunted reputation as an orchestra builder? Wasn't that a specialty of a sort?

"I didn't start out to do this as a doctor might treat a sick patient," he replied. "The goal was that each orchestra should be playing much better in its own degree, with more clarity and discipline, than before."

Dorati had brought clarity and discipline to many major orchestras in a career spanning four decades. In 1941, he helped put the fledgling American Ballet Theatre on its professional feet, and four years later, did much the same for the virtually disbanded Dallas Symphony. Then he moved on to the Minneapolis Symphony in 1949, and spent eleven years there as music director before departing to free-lance with major orchestras around the world. More recently, he was called upon to aid the ailing London, BBC, and Stockholm symphonies.

But the National Symphony may pose the biggest challenge of Antal Dorati's long and illustrious orchestra-building career. And he knows it.

"I wasn't sure I should have such a big job," he confided in his thickly accented, high-resonating voice. "But here I am again, here I go again... it's a funny thing, I like it very much to be with an orchestra and grow with them, and I get very much involved with non-musical matters if I am chief."

That does not include fund-raising, however. "The maintenance of the symphony is not my business," he said briskly. "My business is to spend, and spend well." He thought the government should step in to support the orchestra, along with more private capital.

Publicly, Dorati had avoided comment on the controversial record of his predecessor, Dr. Howard Mitchell. Privately, however, he had expressed concern over the abuses the musicians had endured under the Howard Mitchell-M. Robert Rogers regime.

But that was all a part of the symphony's past, wasn't it? And we should be concentrating on its future, he said.

Dorati had made his American conducting debut guesting with the National Symphony in 1937. He had appeared here with them occasionally over the years, and had done two weeks of concerts with them in January 1969—shortly

after Howard Mitchell announced he would step down at the end of the 1969-70 concert season.

Those two weeks were fateful ones for Dorati, and for the symphony's board of directors, who had set up a conductor review committee (headed by then-symphony association president Lloyd Symington) charged with the task of finding Washington a new maestro.

"We had a long list of prospects," Symington recalled, indicating that the list contained the name of nearly every prominent conductor in the business, including Leonard Bernstein, Zubin Mehta, Erich Leinsdorf, and Seiji Ozawa. He declined to say who were the narrowed-down choices.

"At that point, none of us had made any out-of-town expeditions," he added. "We all liked what we heard, with Dorati those two weeks, and we began a series of informal discussions with him."

In February 1970, it was announced that the National Symphony's board of directors had voted unanimously to appoint Antal Dorati music director. Even Howard Mitchell was enthusiastic: "If you can get that man, you can't do much better," he told the board.

"I think you have to give the board a lot of credit," one close observer of the symphony commented. "It was a very logical choice, and a very sophisticated one—not to have gone after a younger, flash-in-the-pan type."

Eventually, our conversation drifted to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, where the orchestra would take up residence in September. He was enthusiastic about the Kennedy Center, pronounced it "a splendid building," and termed it "a whole new idea for this city." It was going to affect the orchestra "very deeply."

Some people are skeptical, I reminded him. Washington is a city where culture has always taken a back seat to politics, and even with the added impetus of the Kennedy Center, was his stated goal of making the National Symphony not only first-class, but great, a realistic one?

"Such sentences are the sentences of lazy people," he broke in impatiently. "You could also say this about Chicago—the city of the stockyards, and one of the finest orchestras in the world. You can give any reason against it, and it's no reason."

"Only enthusiasm and determination will make this a first-class orchestra. It starts with the idea, the will, and the push to become really great. There's no obstacle here, if they want to have it. It's up to these people to determine what they want. It only takes talent, and care, and patience, and luck. Much luck."

"I think this is the last job of my life," Dorati added, with a direct look to emphasize the point. "I want this to be

the crowning job of my life, and I will do it if they will let me."

**R**eprising his early years, Dorati said he conducted his first orchestra in high school in Budapest, where he was born April 9, 1906.

"My family was a musical one," he said. "My father was a violin player, and so was my mother, and my sister was a singer. I was playing the piano very early. I picked it up by myself. I tuned an old piano that belonged to relatives, and everybody thought it was quite wonderful that I had done this, and could play it, and people came to hear me, and I liked this attention very much. It became clear to me that my destiny was to be a musician."

"Later, I took piano lessons, and then I learned the cello when I was thirteen. I was not such a very fine cellist, but I was a usable cellist."

He was enrolled at the prestigious Budapest Academy of Music when he was fourteen, and trained as a composer, cellist, pianist, and conductor. When had he decided to learn to be a conductor?

"One doesn't learn conducting, one experiences it... like being an explorer. This talent is, to a great extent, a leadership talent. Not just the ego thing, or a musical ability, but a talent of persuasion, a purely practical thing, to tell them what to do. The music must be done some way, so if you're the conductor it's up to you to decide how it is to be done. That's the whole secret of this profession. It can't be taught."

"I knew it a little bit forty years ago, and I knew it better twenty years ago, and now I think I am conducting even better, a better approach, but I always had the talent."

Dorati's talent flourished at the Budapest Academy. "It was a most unusual situation," he said, "like a university with Marconi and Einstein, only with musicians. There was a high voltage of education." Among others, he studied instruments with Leo Weiner, the Hungarian Bizet. "As a musician he was extraordinary," Dorati said.

"And then there was Kodaly, with whom I studied theory, score reading, and composition. And Bartok. He was around, he taught piano. I learned a lot from him, but never in a formal lesson."

He was graduated at eighteen—the youngest in the academy's history. (He then studied at the University of Vienna, 1923-25.) He conducted at the Budapest Royal Opera House from 1924 to 1928; Dresden State Opera, 1928-29; Munster State Opera, 1929-32; and guest conducted in Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. He joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1934 and made extensive tours as its leading conductor. (continued)



By his own tally, Dorati has conducted ninety-five orchestras around the world.

Was there a characteristic Dorati sound he worked to get with all these orchestras?

"Yes, there is a kind of orchestra sound I like and often achieve—a clear, transparent, rather lean sound. All the sounds produced by good orchestras and good conductors are nice, fine sounds, and they are different as conductors are different. This is a human thing."

I was interested in his Minneapolis period, where he had stayed the longest and, typically, had reshaped the symphony and expanded the programming.

Dorati, however, was vague about these eleven years. "Sometimes the presence of an initiator is very irritating," he commented obliquely. You sense the Minneapolis Symphony might not have wanted to move ahead as fast as Dorati wanted it to. There were money problems, he conceded.

"Dorati did not find a top-notch band when he took over in 1949," his manager, Raymond Sokolov (now with the Philadelphia), recalled. "Dimitri Mitropoulos was a tremendous artist, but not a good administrator like Dorati. So Mitropoulos came to Dorati's first concert, and after it was over, with all the people milling about, Mitropoulos said to Dorati in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear—I want to tell you—you made this orchestra a far better orchestra than I ever had."

But had Dorati left Minneapolis under a cloud? Sokolov didn't think so. "I think he just got itchy. There's no ill will there. He's been back to guest conduct, and they gave him a very warm reception."

I met Ilse, Dorati's young wife, at a post-concert party for pianist Andre Watts. She was friendly and very striking—slim, auburn hair, translucent skin and wearing a glittery white pant suit. All that and a pianist, too. Together, Ilse and "Tony" Dorati made a handsome couple. They evoked a welcome note of glamor, though I noticed they did not linger at these parties. Evidently they preferred their own company. Dorati, I understood, was torn between wanting Ilse with him and encouraging her to pursue her career in Europe.

"Your wife, Ilse, did not come with you this trip," I commented now, easing into a more personal line of questioning.

"No."

"She is concertizing now in Europe, I understand..."

"Yes."

"...and will be playing a Mozart Concerto with you and the National Symphony next season..."

"Oh, could you—would you tell how you met your wife... a little bit about

her... and your life together?"

He grew painfully silent. Finally he said, "I don't like to discuss my private life... private life should not be discussed. I find it *detestable*. When our work is done, let us be going home and eat our soup behind closed doors!"

We rode along, uncomfortably, for a few miles. I stared intently at the notes I had taken, trying to think of more questions, but my mind was a temporary blank.

"What do you think of rock music?" I heard myself asking him. He didn't seem to understand.

"Rock music," I repeated. "You know... the Beatles."

"Ah, the Beatles, yes," he replied. "I've heard them... very simple music, very childlike."

"And the younger conductors," I continued, "like Ozawa, or Mehta. What do you think of them?"

"I know Mehta," he said. "I think he's very talented... I being an older man, I think the older conductors, the experienced man, with some maturity... the young man who comes in and exudes a lot of style and personality, this is not always good for the orchestra."

"I was always very conscious of my shortcomings, always," he went on. "When I was younger, I was eager to learn from the older conductor... but this is not always the case today."

I thought it was probably futile to ask about his first marriage, which ended in divorce several years ago. But when I mentioned his daughter and only child, Antonia, a former London jet-setter and stage designer, now married and living in Rome (as does his ex-wife Klara), he smiled softly and did speak of her briefly, but only to confirm what I already knew. He would volunteer nothing more.

The concert (to commemorate Shippensburg State College's centennial year and to dedicate its new auditorium), went very well. Dorati led them in the Verdi overture to *La Forza del Destino*, Strauss' tone poem, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (the audience stirred at the first few bars, popularized as the theme from 2001: A Space Odyssey), and the Dvorak Sixth Symphony. All the rehearsing that morning in the Kennedy Center did them no harm. They really sounded like a National Symphony tonight, out here in the Pennsylvania boondocks.

On the podium, Dorati is a commanding figure. Rather like a Napoleonic general marshalling his forces. His conducting style is taut and economical, with a lot of circular movement. The sun impression is... authority... solidity... weight. A maestro at the peak of his powers.

The day before, in his Watergate apartment, Dorati had played host

to three of Washington's music critics. The *Washington Post's* Paul Hume scamped in late, with profuse apologies, and joined the *Star's* Irving Lowens and the *News'* Milton Berliner, who were seated on the sofa, and proceeded to spark the conversation (off-the-record) with his contagious enthusiasm and interest in Dorati's plans for the Kennedy Center. (Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" would be on the opening program September 9, and he was planning a Haydn festival the following season, and...) They were a delight to listen to. A mini-seminar in musicology.

During the post-concert ride back to Washington, I questioned the maestro about this "fraternizing" with the critics. He chided me for the use of that term. The critics had a role to play here, too, he reminded me, in rebuilding the National Symphony.

He was right, of course. It wasn't just a matter of improving the orchestra—it was also a matter of improving the orchestra's image, and it could be debated whether or not the National Symphony has an image. It has no international reputation to speak of, and not much of an out-of-town audience. A lot of subscribers, yes, but no cachet—no proud, devoted following like Philadelphia, or Boston, or Chicago.

Dorati, you sense, is going to change all that. But not overnight.

It was dark now, and our conversation rambled, fitfully, staying clear of topics like wives and ex-wives.

A strong advocate of the "Renaissance type of life," Dorati is fluent in six languages—English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Hungarian. (He was naturalized an American citizen in 1947.)

He enjoys painting and learning new music. He has a large repertoire, committed to memory.

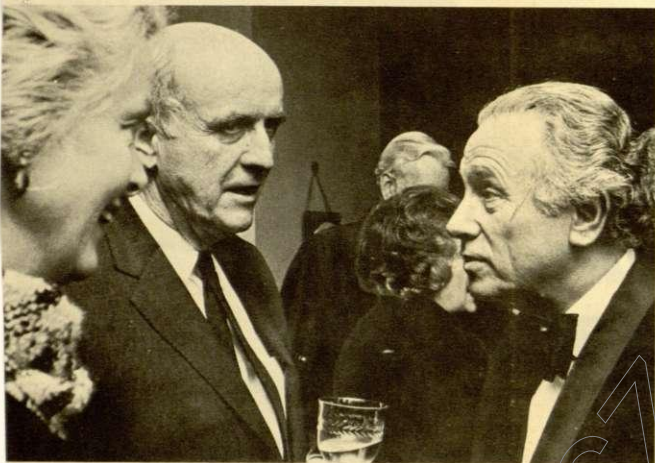
"I learn about ten to fifteen pieces a year—every type that I can read, without going to school again. I plan to write a book, and now I am even composing again, after a long period when I seemed to have an inferiority complex about it." (Earlier compositions include a symphony, a ballet, a cantata, a short mass, a cello concerto, a string quartet, a divertimento for small orchestra.)

An early riser, he composes in the morning. In late afternoon, before a concert, he rests. This is strictly adhered to. "In everything else," he smiled, "I am undisciplined."

He is not a rich man, he said, but he likes to live well. (Dorati's salary here is a closely guarded secret. "He doesn't come cheap," a symphony official says.) He does not have a small circle of close friends. "I can give you a list of fifty—one or two," he said.

He likes good food and good wine and stimulating company, and has a Prussian impatience with inefficiency. He





Antal Dorati with Mr. and Mrs. Roger Stevens after the final concert of Dorati's first season with the National Symphony. Stevens is head of the board of the Kennedy Center, where the symphony will open its new season on September 9.

can be formidably charming and ferociously bad-tempered. He glowers a lot. But he also smiles a lot.

He is a musical elitist who does not believe the appeal of serious music can be broadened.

"The arts are not for everybody," he said. "Never can be. Never will be. It is not our job to thin ourselves out so that we lose our meaning. It has to be approached from the other end."

He is a religious man "in my own way, which is entirely undenominational. I'm kind of contemplative, and believe in a higher authority. I think the higher authority did what he did with me. Now it's my job."

He spoke exuberantly of his current recording project—to do all 104 Haydn symphonies with the Philharmonia Hungarica in Germany. "I have recorded 45, prepared another 24, and among those there is not a single weak one," he marveled. "Each one is like a new miracle." One of the most recorded of conductors—he has won eight Grand Prix du Disques, and his 1812 *Overture* with the Minneapolis Symphony sold over 5 million—his output will total over 300 records when the Haydn project is completed two years hence. He said there are also "two irons in the fire" for him to record with the National Symphony, in due course.

He hoped he would live long enough to complete the Haydn project, he added. That thought he was joking.

"Aah . . . you laugh," he said, suddenly serious, "but wait another thirty or forty years, and you will find out."

Still, the intimations of mortality seemed premature. As maestros go, Dorati, at sixty-five, isn't that old. (Otto

Klemperer is eighty-six; Leopold Stokowski is eighty-four; Eugene Ormandy is seventy-two.) Maestros live to ripe old ages, and they're active to the end. And Dorati's little blue ledger showed him booked solidly through 1974. (In June, the National Symphony renewed his original two-year contract for an additional two years—through the 1973-74 season. And he will continue as music director of the Stockholm Symphony as well.)

Had he enjoyed good health?

"Yes," he replied, making no mention of a serious heart attack he had suffered a few years ago in Europe. "I am very young in spirit, and very tough in physique . . . but I have been young for a very long time."

How would he like to be remembered?

"As an all-around musician, and an all-around man," he said. "My concern and ambition is to contribute my talent at all times. What is done afterwards is of lesser importance—but I'm not indifferent about it. I like to be accepted as one of the 'top echelon' conductors of my time."

He is so accepted in Europe, though his star may have dimmed a bit in America in recent years—which has nothing to do with his musicianship and everything to do with publicity, exposure, and image-making. He may be banking on the nation's capital to bring it to full incandescence.

Dorati and his National Symphony were running through the final, bombastic movement of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony when I arrived next morning in the Kennedy Center concert hall.

Scattered throughout the red-plush orchestra seats were about 200 persons of varying ages, listening intently. Others walked about in the red-carpeted aisles and up the ivory-colored tiers. There was a lot of whispered concurring, nodding of heads, and furrowing of brows. The new hall was rife with acoustical experts—some professional, some not.

I sauntered from stage right to the rear of the hall, and stood there listening. The Tchaikovsky Fourth seemed to reverberate well enough. (They had played it magnificently a few nights before in their last subscription concert ever in DAR Constitution Hall.)

Dorati ran through some other musical excerpts and a few of the players left the stage and milled around in the orchestra. They were amazed at how much better it sounded down here in the orchestra than up there on the stage—especially the basses, who complained the day before it was like playing under water. A good omen?

Then Dorati, clad in dark rehearsal slacks and a loose-fitting gold sweater, was down in the orchestra, and Norman Scribner was on the podium, leading his Cathedral Choral Society and the symphony in Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." When they finished, Dorati came forward, smiling and applauding, and uttered an enthusiastic "Bravo!"

There was a bit more Handel, and then it was over, the musicians were streaming off the stage, and Dorati was off in the wings, conversing with Kennedy Center president Roger Stevens, artistic administrator George London, and symphony board president David Lloyd Kreeger, who minutes before had been bussing various ladies of the orchestra. A festive mood prevailed. Everybody thought they had a good hall here.

Dorati was departing in a few hours for Dulles to catch his plane to London (and then on to a brief reunion with Ilse at their St. Adrian, Switzerland, home before continuing on to guest conduct in Israel and Finland, and record more Haydn in Germany). Bill Denton, the symphony's new young manager, was driving him. I thought of asking to accompany them—it would have made a fitting final image for the article, our jet-setting maestro bidding farewell to his first season in Washington—but the maestro wanted to have a "confidential talk" with his manager, his manager told me, so I didn't pursue it. God knows, they'd had precious little time together the past few hectic days.

But you had to hand it to Dorati—making maximum use of every available minute.

And you had to hand it to him for what he had already done to resurrect the National Symphony.

And the best is yet to come. Starting on September 9. □

DORATI

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