1975

DORATI ANTAL

Composing To Order: The Musician's Advance

By Paul Hume

The history of commissions to composers for new music is a long and fascinating one. The world of music enjoys the Bartok Concerto for Orchestra because Serge Koussevitzky, at the suggestion of Joseph Szigeti and Fritz Reiner, insisted that the gravely ill Bartok accept a $1,000 commission to write an orchestral work. More important, as Bartok himself acknowledged, there was something in the challenge and excitement of creating a new large work that helped him gain the strength necessary for the creative process.

During the centuries in which composers have been glad to receive commissions, many of the most famous have made their own conditions. When Verdi accepted the commission to write "Aida," he specified the amount of money he would expect, the currency in which it was to be paid, the dates on which he expected it and the performance rights that went with the completed score.

When Antal Dorati and the National Symphony Orchestra commissioned 12 composers to write works to be given their premieres during the orchestra's Bicentennial season, they certainly did not dream that three of those men would not live to deliver their scores. But that is the unhappy statistic.

Frank Martin, a precise contemporary of Arthur Honegger, shared with his friend the honor of being Switzerland's foremost composer of this century. After his death last year, his widow wrote a note to Antal Dorati in which she suggests the character of the work her husband, who was then 84, had planned for the National Symphony.

"I must tell you," Mme. Martin wrote, "that he looked forward with pleasure to start the piece for you

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(that was to be in January) and that he knew exactly how it would be. He decided to do a cortege of carnaval, with a succession of various scenes corresponding to the group which would pass. It was to begin with a gay, festive march. Then he saw a group of clowns passing, thus: music of the circus. Then a group of gypsies, thus flamenco music, etc. All would have been colorful and gay. What a pity that he couldn't do it! In any case, he thought often of you in these last times, while he prepared himself innermost for this composition, which he loved . . ."

In that brief note, the composer's widow gives a glimpse of the working methods of one of this century's most aristocratic musicians.

Luigi Dallapiccola was another such musician. One of Antal Dorati's finest triumphs here came last season when he conducted memorable performances of the Italian composer's one-act opera, "Il Prigoniero." The work was recorded a few days after the Kennedy Center hearings and will be released shortly on London Records. It is likely to win the same kind of prestigious awards as the orchestra's recent Messiaen album. Dallapiccola's death early this year at the age of 70 robs not only the National Symphony but the entire music world of the opportunity of hearing a new work from one of the significant figures of our time.

Most tragic, in terms of his relatively short life, was the death last February of Robert Evett, age 52.

One of Washington's best-known composers, and unquestionably one of its finest, Evett had enjoyed for many years regular performances of his music by musicians in this city who were attracted by his distinctive manner as well as by his persistent refusal to be turned aside into any modish avenues of the moment. A concerto for orchestra that he wrote on commission some years ago was premiered by the National Symphony, and many people were looking forward with a special sense of anticipation to the music he was writing for the Bicentennial season.

Before he died on Feb. 2, Evett had written out some of it and had discussed details of its instrumentation with the orchestra's manager, William Denton.

When Antal Dorati heard that some of Evett's score actually existed, he asked Russell Woollen, the orchestra's pianist and a longtime friend of Evett, as well as a composer himself, to examine what there was to see if enough had been finished to make even a short piece. Woollen reported that there was some seven or eight minutes of music that could be completed.

And so next year at the orchestra's final subscription concerts, April 27-30, between Brahms' Song of Destiny and the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven, Dorati will conduct the premiere of Evett's "Monadnock," a fragment from the larger work he had planned called "Reconciled Spirit," based on writings of Mark Twain.

One of the commissioned works has already been performed, for Dorati decided to observe the opening of the Bicentennial year by giving the first performances of Robert Russell Bennett's "The Fun and Faith of William Billings" late in April. It, too, was then immediately recorded.

Of the remaining eight commissioned works, Dorati has scheduled four for the spring of 1976, the other four for the fall of that year.