



August 5, 1989

Antonia Brico, 87, a Conductor; Fought Barriers to Women in 30's

By ALLAN KOZINN

Antonia Brico, a conductor who led her own orchestras in New York in the 1930's and who devoted her life to fighting prejudice against women in the orchestral world, died on Thursday after a long illness. She was 87 years old and had lived at the Bella Vita Towers, a nursing home in Denver, since 1988.

Miss Brico, who was the subject of the 1974 film "[Antonia: Portrait of a Conductor](#)," made her way in the male-dominated musical world largely through the force of her personality as well as her unshakable determination and a facility with both the standard orchestral literature and contemporary American works.

Those qualities helped her break many barriers. In 1930 she became the first woman to conduct the Berlin Philharmonic. Seven years later she became the first woman to

conduct an opera performance by a major New York company when she led the New York Hippodrome Opera production of Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel." And in 1938 she made her debut with the New York Philharmonic, becoming the first woman to conduct that orchestra.

She had mixed feelings about these distinctions, however. "I do not call myself a woman conductor," she said in interviews. "I call myself a conductor who happens to be a woman."

Miss Brico was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, on June 26, 1902. Her family moved to Oakland, Calif., when she was 6 years old. She intended to be a pianist at first, but in 1919 she enrolled at the University of California, where she took a liberal arts degree in 1923. During her student years, she supported herself by playing piano recitals and became interested in conducting while working as an assistant to Paul Steindorff, the director of the San Francisco Opera.

In 1927, she went to Berlin to study conducting at the Berlin State Academy of Music. Among her teachers was Karl Muck, a former director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who was then conducting the Hamburg Philharmonic and who helped her obtain a coaching position at Bayreuth.

When she made her Berlin Philharmonic debut in 1930, the critic of the *Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote that she "possesses more ability, cleverness and musicianship than certain of her male colleagues who bore us in Berlin." Later that year she conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic but failed to win a conducting post she sought there. After a successful tour of Poland and the Balkans, she returned to New York, where she made her debut conducting the Musicians' Symphony Orchestra. She Founded Her Own
Miss Brico continued to seek a conducting post with one of the established orchestras in the United States, and when she did not succeed, she founded an ensemble of her own, the Women's Symphony Orchestra, which flourished from 1935 until 1939, when it became the Brico Symphony Orchestra.

When her career in New York began to falter, around 1940, she moved to Denver, where she taught and was a guest conductor. In 1947 she became director of the Denver Businessmen's Symphony, which was later renamed the Brico Symphony. She held that post until she retired from conducting in 1985. She also directed the Denver Opera Association, the Women's String Orchestra and the Boulder Philharmonic and was active as a teacher. One of her students in the 1950's was Judy Collins, who became famous as a folksinger in the late 1960's and who directed the "Antonia" film.

Miss Collins's film rekindled interest in Miss Brico. When she returned to New York to conduct the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra in 1975, her single scheduled concert sold out so quickly that a second was added. CBS recorded her concerts for release on LP. Her last New York appearances were in 1977, when she performed with the Brooklyn Philharmonia.

There are no survivors.