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LONDON, April 3 — After breakfast was ordered the telephone rang in the Savoy Hotel suite overlooking the Thames and Andre Previn, a slight man with an easy manner, answered.

"I would love to conduct in Paris and Israel next year," he said, "but we will have to check. My schedule is a little full."

Mr. Previn is an American, but the reply was typical British understatement. For Mr. Previn, in addition to everything else he does, has recently accepted an appointment as principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

He is also the musical director of the Houston Symphony, which he is about to take on a two-week tour. He and Alan Jay Lerner are completing the musical score for "Coco," a musical destined for Broadway, which goes into rehearsal this December with Katharine Hepburn in the lead.

Odd Musical Roots

Mr. Previn, who is 38 years old, and his wife, are writing the music and lyrics for a film musical adaptation of "Great Expectations." He has record commitments and plans to conduct the Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Boston Symphony Orchestras, the Buffalo Philharmonic and the Berlin Philharmonic in the coming season. He led the American Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall last month.

Mr. Previn's musical roots are not those of the traditional maestro. Born in Berlin, he came to the United States at the age of 10. By 16 he had joined the music department of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and was soon scoring a "Lassie" movie.

He went on to compose more than 30 original film scores



André Previn rehearsing the London Symphony Orchestra

and arranged 20 others. He won four academy awards, and made a name for himself as a jazz pianist as well.

By becoming the eighth principal conductor of the 65-year-old London Symphony, Mr. Previn said he had fulfilled a life-long ambition.

"It is one the world's greatest orchestras," he said. "This is all too good to be true and I get a scary feeling when something you want so badly happens."

"I've wanted to conduct for

years and years," Mr. Previn continued, "but it was difficult to get anyone to take that desire very seriously for a long while, particularly in the United States.

"There's a small group of music critics in the states who will forgive you anything — jazz, a long prison term, or what have you — anything but scoring a Hollywood musical.

"I went into the provinces in the states and learned more about the technique. I stopped playing jazz in public. People

in Hollywood could not quite understand what I was doing. Some would say: 'You don't get paid for Beethoven what you get for Sandra Dee.'"

Harold Lawrence, general manager of the London Symphony, said there was now "no doubt in anybody's mind about Mr. Previn's talents as a dedicated serious musician." Mr. Lawrence, who took over his job in December, is also an American. He worked in New York for radio station WQXR and for Mercury and Philips records.

Mr. Previn plans to shuttle back and forth between the United States and Europe for a while, but will move his wife, Dory, and their children to London within a year. This coming season alone, he plans to conduct about 40 times with the Houston Symphony and from a dozen to two dozen times with the London orchestra.

In neither London nor Houston does Mr. Previn intend to conduct every concert. The use of guest conductors and jet airplanes, he said, will enable him to handle both assignments.

"Of course I have other commitments," he said. "Oh yes, I'm also going to do the musical score for the film, 'Catch 22.'"