

# THE SHOW MUST GO ON

On tour with the LSO in 1912 and 2012

Gareth Davies

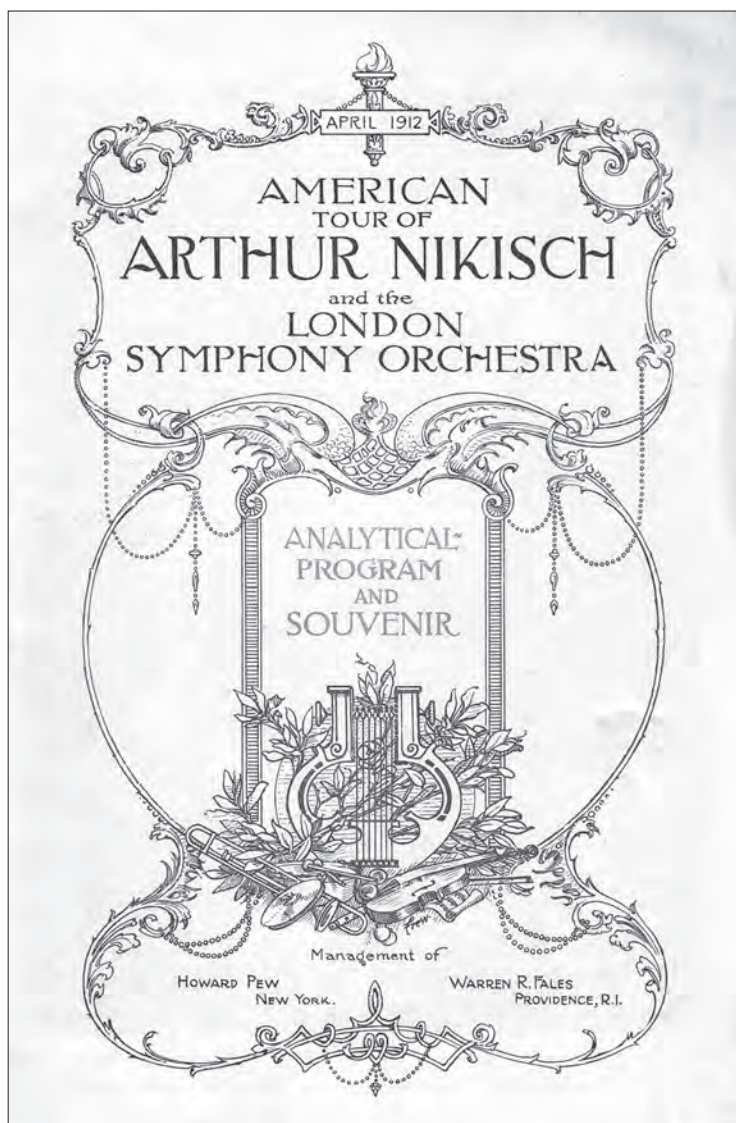




## Upbeat Before the Downbeat 1912

It's 1.30 p.m. on Thursday 28th March, 1912. Euston Station is unusually crowded as the one hundred musicians of the London Symphony Orchestra stand around saying their good-byes to friends and family before embarking on a historic tour to the United States of America.

No European orchestra has ever travelled across the Atlantic before, and this departure is the beginning of an adventure that has been two years in the planning. The newspapers in London and New York have been full of articles publicizing the tour, pictures of the conductor Arthur Nikisch have been plastered on the front page of the *New York Times*, and gossip columns have whispered about his alleged fee of \$1,000 a night. The headline in an article published in New York on that day boldly describes the tour as 'An American Conquest' and even the King himself has given it his seal of approval. For a fledgling orchestra, born out of rebellion only eight years earlier, it is an early statement of intent that the LSO is forging



Souvenir programme from the 1912 American tour.

its own path; it is a young, ambitious newcomer. Sit down, be quiet, and listen.

Sir Thomas Beecham had planned to take the Queen's Hall Orchestra to America a few years before – plans that came to nothing – and perhaps it was his failure that galvanized the board of directors at the time to make sure the LSO made the first move. However, the name of the London Symphony Orchestra on its own was not enough. In the last few months before commercial recording of the symphonic repertoire really took off, only people who had travelled had heard the legendary ensembles of central Europe, and the mythology of these great performers loomed large in people's minds. The Berlin Philharmonic, Leipzig Gewandhaus and America's own Boston Symphony Orchestra were the Holy Grail for an orchestral enthusiast. However, surely this dynamic ensemble with an already turbulent history was going to be welcomed in the land of the free.

From his offices on 42nd Street, the New York-based promoter Howard Pew had been bringing musical acts of varying sorts to American audiences since 1885. He had had great success persuading Presidents Harrison and McKinley to allow him to take the US Marine Band around the country, as well as bringing a host of Italian opera stars to sing for the eager American public. A long-held dream of his was to bring a premier European ensemble across. Nobody had done it before, and he was a man with a shrewd business sense as well as high artistic standards, so the LSO was not his first point of call in 1910. He knew that to sell tickets and encourage other rich benefactors to help him make it happen he needed a big name on the rostrum; and so, before he could decide on an ensemble, the first piece of the jigsaw was to secure the services of the conductor Arthur Nikisch.

Nikisch was revered in America, thanks to his highly successful tenure as principal conductor with the Boston Symphony

Orchestra. His performances were still being talked about 19 years later, especially as he hadn't returned to the USA; audiences were desperate to see him again. Before the advent of the jet-setting conductor, audiences had to wait a long time between appearances, which only increased the mystique surrounding Nikisch and consequently his draw at the box office. The combination of high artistic standards and box office receipts was what attracted Pew.

From the outset, Nikisch made it clear that he was interested in coming on one condition: that he could bring the orchestra of his choice. Knowing that it would always be the conductor rather than the orchestra that would sell tickets, and also aware that Nikisch would hardly agree to come all the way back to the States with a second-rate band, Pew agreed immediately. Nikisch then proudly announced that the only orchestra he would consider accompanying across the Atlantic was the London Symphony Orchestra.

Pew must have been delighted. He knew that bringing Nikisch back for a triumphant return was going to generate huge press interest. It would also attract some of the musically-minded philanthropists he had in mind to help pay for the small matter of bringing an entire orchestra and their instruments across the sea, not to mention insuring their instruments and paying for food, hotels, travel, and music hire. The costs were going to be high, the risks even higher; everything had to be right for the tour to be a success. However, as Henry Kniebel wrote in the *New York Tribune* in 1912 shortly before the tour began:

In the highest form of instrumental art, as in the hybrid form of opera which chiefly lives on in affectation and fad, it is the singer and not the song that challenges attention from the multitude. We used to have prima donnas in New York whose names on a program ensured financial success for the performance ...

for prima donna ... read conductor, and a parallel is established in orchestral art which is even more humiliating than that pervading our opera house.

Kniebel's disapproving remarks suggested a future in which a new world of superstar conductors travelled the globe, commanding adoration and large fees: exactly what Pew wanted. Negotiations began.

As plans progressed for the 1912 tour, LSO managing director Thomas Busby realized that if it was to become a reality, financial support would be needed – preferably from both sides of the Atlantic. Howard Pew was constantly sending letters to the board of the LSO about ways to keep down costs, which were beginning to spiral out of control owing to the sheer scale of the tour. At a meeting, the orchestra had agreed to the trip and sent a list of requirements to Pew. He was to provide

All meals, three a day and accommodation in which not more than two should occupy a room. Mr Pew should provide a capable baggage and instrument porter in addition to the LSO porter and that \$20,000 to be deposited with Brown and Shipley and Co. prior to the departure from England.

Ultimately, most of these demands were met, but in a more creative way than perhaps the board had imagined. Accommodation was indeed provided, a hotel in New York being the first port of call; although, as Charles Turner reveals in his 1912 diary, this was not quite what they were expecting: 'Go to Hotel Victoria, Broadway. A giant place but more trouble. They have put 3 or 4 beds in one room. Large, beautiful rooms but the fellows don't like it. Beautiful lunch anyhow at 12 o'clock.'

The player-to-room ratio was not as per the contract (although a stationary hotel was a temporary measure in any case), but at least Turner's lunch was satisfactory. After leaving

New York on April 9th, the players would not sleep in a hotel room again until the end of their trip, on April 28th. To save costs whilst still keeping his end of the agreement, Howard Pew had come up with the idea of sending the orchestra around America on a specially chartered train. The fly in the ointment was that the players' accommodation during the trip would consist solely of several shared sleeping cars on the train. Turner's diary reveals that immediately after most concerts the band would trudge back to their train, drink, smoke, and play cards until the early morning, and then catch a little sleep in their bunks. This was not the accommodation they might have hoped for, but then, as now, in the arts world, every penny counted.

At a board meeting in November 1911, Thomas Busby had presented a piece of paper that would be of great help in securing funding for the tour. He had come directly from a meeting at Buckingham Palace, where he had asked the King to consider giving his patronage to the LSO, pointing out that this would greatly benefit the special relationship between Britain and America. There was an ulterior motive to his request, in that 18 members of the LSO were also members of the King's Private Band, and as such were contracted to be available to perform at the palace at all times. Many were key players, and so by gaining the King's patronage, Busby ensured that these players would be released to play in the concert tour. There was one small condition: all 18 members were required to wear three King's Medals at every engagement in America, so that members of the public could pick them out from the rest of the orchestra. Busby and Pew must have been delighted; the letter from the King was proudly displayed at the front of the souvenir programme.

In one of the many pre-tour articles that appeared in the American press, Busby, when asked about the repertoire for the tour, declined to reveal it, but boasted that the audience was in