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How touring puts orchestras on the map — even with a lame-duck leader

By [Anne Midgette](#) February 10, 2016 at 5:30 AM



The Wiener Konzerthaus, where the National Symphony Orchestra performed last night in the middle of their current European tour. (Photo: Clemens Pfeiffer.)

'Tis the season of lame ducks. Take Christoph Eschenbach at the National Symphony Orchestra. I've been plenty critical of Eschenbach during his tenure, but there's no denying that he's gotten a few things done. When he came to the NSO, he arrived with rosy dreams of improving the orchestra, performing chamber music with its musicians, making more recordings and going on tour more. Now, he's on his way out, departing after his contract expires in 2017, at the end of what is seen as a rather inconclusive tenure — and yet, he did many of the things he said he wanted to do.

True, he made only one recording, which wasn't particularly notable. And true, the orchestra still hasn't managed to shake off its second-tier, needs-improvement status. But to be fair: it has a lot of new players, it's sounding better, and — true to his promise — it has embarked on its

third international tour in four years, to some of Europe's musical capitals (last night, the NSO played Vienna) with two soloists, including the pianist Lang Lang. The announcement in January that Gianandrea Noseda would be Eschenbach's successor has no doubt helped morale and arguably undermined Eschenbach's status on this tour and at home, but in his final seasons, he leaves the orchestra with a sense that, finally, things may be looking up.

In some incalculable way, the tour may help solidify this sentiment. Tours, as I've written before, are morale-boosters for an orchestra, building a sense of solidarity — certainly in the repertory the players perform night after night — and bringing the group in front of new audiences — something more important than ever, since there are fewer opportunities for an orchestra to be heard in today's uneven recording landscape. (If you measure by recent releases, the Seattle Symphony, with its in-house label, is more in the limelight than the august Boston Symphony Orchestra.)

They're also hugely expensive — and more popular than ever. Indeed, in touring so often of late, the NSO may be riding the proverbial bandwagon. According to [Classical Movements](#), the Alexandria-based travel agency that is responsible for booking and arranging the NSO's tours, orchestra touring is on the rise, well on the rebound from the days without travel after the financial crisis of 2008. Despite the fact that both the Seattle and Dallas orchestras canceled planned tours rather late in the day — Dallas, because of concerns about terrorism in the wake of the attacks in Paris, which most other orchestras seem not to share — Classical Movements has more tours in 2016 than in 2015, and even more are coming in 2017.

It's hard to quantify a tour's success, particularly before the reviews start coming in — and particularly if that success is measured in part in an uptick in donations, which remains invisible to the eyes of a critic. But the reviews of the NSO's last European tour were generally kind, and to date, the orchestra has at least found favor with one critic in Madrid who praised its round, clear sound — saying that Eschenbach always gets this from his orchestras — and enjoyed the Schubert as much as I did, though was disappointed by the Brahms No. 1. Next stop: Düsseldorf. Berlin awaits.