

PRELUDE

He had about him the cosmopolitan elegance of the now vanished Habsburg monarchy, and more than a hint of Hollywood good looks¹

The stylised form of studio portrait is familiar. The subject is seated, attired in formal court dress with hands carefully positioned. Height and build are indeterminate. The photographic hue is not quite sepia, but nonetheless redolent of that period around the turn of the twentieth century which looked both back to a world of apparent certainty and forward to a world soon to be torn remorselessly apart. The sitter is Arthur Nikisch, at this point in time conductor of the Royal Opera, Budapest, who was soon to occupy a commanding position in the musical capitals of Europe. The famously mesmeric eyes are fixed not on the camera but on some point in the distance, whether in the past or the future is impossible to tell. The carefully trimmed beard and luxuriant moustache obscure whatever inscrutable expression may or may not be playing around the mouth. The leonine shock of untamed hair has about it a hint of wildness in keeping with the carefully cultivated aura of the romantic hero. The portrait is profoundly ambivalent. Does the sitter belong to the Romantic age or the modern age? Janus-faced, is he looking backwards to the age of heroes, or forwards to that of the anti-hero? As one who is amongst the first of the virtuoso conductors, is he a man of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries? As an ethnic Hungarian whose activities will shortly be centred in the newly founded German Empire, is his primary allegiance to Habsburg or Hohenzollern? Does he serve the musical artwork, or does he make the musical artwork serve him? Does the oft-repeated mantra ‘Magician of the Podium’ imply some demonic power to be unleashed at will, or does it indicate something illusory, almost fake, about the art of the conductor as practised by those bold enough to wield the baton?

Or what of the newly prosperous occupant of ‘a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London’² who on a summer Saturday afternoon in 1895 has travelled by the Metropolitan Railway to the recently opened Queen’s

¹ Jähner, Harald, *Life in the Fallout of the Third Reich 1945–1955*, tr. Shaun Whiteside (London: W. H. Allen, 2021), p.261.

² Dickens, Charles, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864–5), chapter 2, p.7.



1 Nikisch during his time as Director of the Hungarian Royal Opera c.1893 (Jonathan Brown, *Great Wagner Conductors*, p.206).

Hall in the heart of the capital to satisfy his appetite for orchestral music? The players are familiar, but on the podium is not the regular conductor Henry Wood but a figure much smaller in stature with an impressive mane of dark hair and enormous white shirt cuffs almost concealing his small, feminine hands. Those with literary interests might detect something of Jane Austen's aristocratic Mr Darcy, with perhaps more than a dash of Emily Brontë's gypsy-blooded Heathcliff.³ Can this be the famed Arthur Nikisch, whose reputation amongst the wealthy elites of Boston on America's east coast has already crossed the Atlantic?

Such is the enigma of the figure gazing sphinx-like towards some indeterminate point in the far distance.

³ Austen, Jane, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: T. Egerton, 1813); Brontë, Emily, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847).

