



Selecting An Overseas Tour Company

Bill Scott

In June of 1980 I came to South Carolina to accept the position of string coordinator for Spartanburg County School District, a system that has a long history of excellence in orchestral training. Part of my assignment was to organize a European concert tour for the summer of 1983. I had never participated as a student or conductor in such a venture and I found it to be a challenging and educational opportunity. Much of the knowledge that I have gained from this experience could be beneficial to other organizations planning an overseas tour.

Start With Bids

In choosing a representative to organize our tour, I phoned eight companies that were listed in *The Instrumentalist* as specializing in European concert tour arrangements and asked them for an itinerary and bid price for a 21-day concert tour of the British Isles. I was unsure at the time how many students would be able to go, so I requested estimates for 80, 95, and 110 participants.

When I received eight completely different itineraries I realized it would be impossible to make a fair judgment of which company offered the most for our money. I was fortunate to receive some advice from a fellow faculty member who visits Eng-

land quite frequently. We spent an afternoon mapping out a 21-day tour plan listing, day-by-day, the optimum cities in which to present concerts and the locations to visit for sightseeing. I mailed this proposal to the same eight companies requesting their bid price to include the following costs:

- Round-trip air transportation
- Transportation via private motorcoach throughout the land portion of the tour
- Transportation of the instruments via truck
- Sightseeing tours as indicated in the itinerary with a local guide
- Services of an escort throughout the land portion of the tour
- All tips and taxes for hotel and restaurant services included in the tour package
- Accommodations: Tourist-category hotels, 3-4 bedded per room with 25% bath; homestays; university housing (specify on bid as to type of accommodations)
- Meals: continental breakfast and dinner daily; three meals per day (specify on bid)
- Publicity and promotion for concerts

The following chart represents the total cost per student quoted by each company and includes several extra charges: an additional \$5,000 for emergency cash, transportation to the airport from Spartanburg High School, and accommodations and air fare for 10 chaperones.

Cost per student

Company	70 students	85 students	100 students	Comments
A	\$2251	\$2141	\$2063	Hotel
A	\$2019	\$1914	\$1840	Hotel, 22 days rather than 21
B	\$2250	\$2171	\$2107	Hotel, BBC performance
C	\$2157	\$2066	\$2006	Hotel
C	\$1929	\$1843	\$1786	University housing if available
D	\$2054	\$1963	\$1914	Hotel
E	\$2003	\$1943	\$1902	All homestays, three meals per day
F	\$1970	\$1952	\$1940	Hotel and university housing, full English breakfast, 22 days
G	\$1417	\$1370	\$1337	Reciprocal homestay agreement
H	\$1871	\$1814	\$1775	Hotel, 5 nights of homestays



A Look at the Companies

All companies had excellent references. I decided that the bids of companies A, B, C, D, and E were too expensive; but cost was not the only factor I considered.

Company A's second quote represented an extended tour package for 22 days, which turned out to be a lower bid price than their 21-day plan. Their air fare for the 22-day package was the lowest of all vying companies (some airlines are able to offer a better rate over a longer stay period and cover the additional cost of an extra day in London for a lower price). Unfortunately I could not contract only the air portion of the bid from them. Other companies did offer the option of selecting only the land or air segment of their package.

Company B offered the possibility of a BBC televised performance, which was most enticing. Had the broadcast been guaranteed, I may have awarded the contract to this company.

Company E was able to schedule a flight out of the Greenville-Spartanburg Jet Port, which would have been more convenient than the three hour bus ride to the airport in Atlanta. I received two counterproposals from this company after I announced the selection of another company. The bids included the basic itinerary desired and the accommodations were changed to include tourist-category hotels and a maximum of five homestays. Each succeeding offer represented a reduction in price.

This was the only company consulted that advertised itself as a non-profit, tax-exempt foundation. Its bid was far more expensive than several of the profit-making companies. For the first bid, which appears on the chart, the company planned to use homestays for the entire 21-day period. My faculty liked the idea because there would be fewer chaperoning duties, but I could not imagine our students being guests for that length of time. The original bid included three meals per day. However, during the trip I found that most of the students and faculty enjoyed the opportunity to eat in smaller groups on their own for the lunch meal.

Company F's tour package included a full English breakfast, which is much more substantial than the continental breakfast. The vice-president of this company had the most knowledge about travel in the British Isles of any of the representatives I talked with. He also offered to fly my wife and me to Great Britain over the Christmas holidays to observe his organization handling another tour. The company was willing to work with my itinerary but preferred its own, which stationed the orchestra in five areas over the 21 days. The orchestra would take excursions from these locations for sightseeing and possible concerts. One of these areas was Birmingham and I was not interested in visiting that city for an extended period. (After having finished the tour, I realized that company F had the right concept. I had made the mistake of scheduling five consecutive one-night stands in Newcastle, Leeds, Cambridge, Birmingham, and Oxford. Although the sites were not far apart, being uprooted every morning was extremely exhausting. It would have been wiser to have stayed in a more central part of England, making short trips to satisfy the sightseeing part of the itinerary.)

Company G required parents to sign a reciprocal homestay agreement. While in Great Britain, our students would be housed completely in pri-



Bill Scott, string coordinator for Spartanburg (South Carolina) County School District, has also served as conductor of the new England Music Camp Symphony, Philharmonia Orchestra, and Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestras, and as assistant conductor of the University of Wisconsin orchestras. He teaches applied bass for Converse College (South Carolina) and is a writer on string bass pedagogy.



vate homes, and for the next three years, their families would be required to house a group of students for a week each summer. Although this arrangement would have meant a great savings, I was not interested in traveling in this manner. (The reciprocal program was originally designed as a one-week exchange, and I did not think it would work well for an extended period.) Company G also gave me a bid for tourist-category hotel accommodations. The price was too expensive, exceeding the cost of company A for 85 and 100 participants.

My Choice

I awarded the contract to company H, Performing Arts Abroad, for three reasons: they appeared to be the most willing to undertake the itinerary I presented, had excellent references, and the price was right. They proved to be an outstanding company to work with and I was extremely pleased with the entire tour. We performed at a variety of concert sites that were most suitable for our orchestra:

- Holy Trinity Church in Stapleton. The concert was shared with the Colston Boys School Brass Ensemble, a private academy.

- Spectrum Arena, Warrington. We performed in a new concert hall.

- Mitchell Theatre, Glasgow. Our performance was sponsored by Prince and Princess of Wales Hospice. The Lord Provost of Glasgow was in attendance and presented the orchestra with a silver plate to commemorate the occasion. Each student received a mug with the Glasgow Seal at the dinner reception following the concert.

- Inverkeithing School, Dunfirmline. This was the only public school performance.

- Hexham Abbey, Hexham. This Abbey, a structure that dates back to 600 A.D., is the size of most of the cathedrals in Britain. It was a beautiful experience for our students to perform there.

- Guildhall, London. A former Spartanburg string coordinator, Peg Gignilliat, was in attendance at our only outdoor concert.

The hotel accommodations were superior to the tourist-class/25% bath hotels I had contracted. The success that we experienced in Great Britain, both in housing and concert arrangements, was due to a large extent to Sheila Matheson, a British travel consultant hired by Performing Arts Abroad to work out the logistics of the trip.

Looking Ahead

I encourage long range planning in preparation for an overseas tour. Although fund-raising for this trip was done over a three year period, the actual tour planning was completed nine months before we departed for Great Britain. When the Spartanburg High School Orchestra makes its next European tour in June of 1986, I will use the following timetable:

Fall 1983: Fund-raising begins. Talk to the students about possible countries to visit. Read tour books to gain ideas for concert sites and sightseeing.

Fall 1984: Contact companies that specialize in music tours and send them a rough itinerary listing the selected countries and cities to visit and the desired number of concerts to schedule.

December 1984: Based on bid price and detailed itinerary, select a company to begin work on scheduling concerts (18 months should be ample time for the concert arrangements to be made). After the concerts are finalized, the remainder of the itinerary should be reworked, if necessary, to fit the concert schedule.

I suggest handling a European tour like all other large school purchases — investigate all the possible choices. In awarding the contract to Performing Arts Abroad instead of company A, I was able to save each student \$380, a total savings of over \$24,000. When you consider the entire cost of the British Isles concert tour to be \$122,768, this figure represents a savings of 20% for the same basic itinerary.

Will I use the same company again in 1986 when the symphony travels abroad? It's hard to say. I was pleased with their work, but I have learned that the market for overseas travel is very competitive, and it pays to shop around. ■