Coverage
UT San Diego classical music critic James Chute will be traveling with the San Diego Symphony later this month when the orchestra embarks on a historic road trip to Carnegie Hall before heading to China. Chute will file online and TV reports from New York City and the orchestra’s various stops in China.

Today: Is the San Diego Symphony’s approach the new business model for orchestras? And we talk to world-renowned pianist Lang Lang and San Diego Symphony conductor Jahja Ling about the significance of the symphony’s trip to China.

Oct. 27: Profile of Rancho Santa Fe resident June Shillman, the president of the San Diego-Santa Fe Friendship Society, who orchestrated the symphony’s China tour.

Nov. 2: Chute takes a look at Yantai, San Diego’s sister city.

Nov. 10: Chute reports from China about the symphony’s performances in Yantai and Shanghai.

ON THE ROAD WITH THE SYMPHONY
While other big-city orchestras struggle, San Diego Symphony is in the black and flourishing with trips to New York, China

JAMES CHUTE • UT

During the same week the San Diego Symphony performs in Carnegie Hall, the Minnesota Orchestra was also scheduled to present a pair of concerts. The world-renowned ensemble frequently plays in New York, and a visit in 2000 prompted one prominent critic to call it “the greatest orchestra in the world.”

But the Minnesota Orchestra won’t be fulfilling its Nov. 2-3 Carnegie dates. The musicians have been locked out of Symphony Hall in Minneapolis for more than a year. With the musicians unwilling to accept substantial pay cuts, orchestra management canceled the concerts, music director Osmo Vänskä resigned, and the prospects for the distinguished 110-year-old institution are bleak.

Minnesota is the most extreme case of an orchestra in trouble, but symphony orchestras from Detroit to Philadelphia are struggling. The time-honored, conventional model of the American symphony orchestra appears to be broken.

In San Diego, however, the symphony has developed an alternative strategy, and SEE SYMPHONY • E7

LANG LANG AND THE SYMPHONY
EA • Piano superstar to play at Carnegie Hall with San Diego orchestra

A DECADE IN THE MAKING
EA • Music director Jahja Ling brings the orchestra to China
SYMPHONY • Jacobses’ gift has given the organization stability

FROM $1 with it, a decade of growth and stability. Its $19 million budget — nearly doubled from a decade ago — is in the black. And it has raised several million dollars in additional funds that will allow it to perform for the first time in Carnegie Hall with Lang Lang on Oct. 29 and then embark on a three-city concert tour of China.

“We keep in touch with what the orchestra industry is doing out there with all the lockouts, the shutdowns and strikes, and we’ve managed to avoid all that,” said Evelyn Olson Lamden, chair of the orchestra’s board of directors. “Musicians, staff and board — we’re all working together as a team.”

New realities
The confounding element in reinventing the symphony orchestra is the necessity of a certain number of musicians to play the core repertoire. And like a sports team, it needs to play together with regularity in order to produce music at an acceptable level. Yet the cost involved in that time- and labor-intensive endeavor is what threatens an orchestra’s viability.

“We want to show them San Diego has its own culture as good as a New York, Chicago or Los Angeles. We can play with the big guys.”
San Diego Symphony CEO Edward “Ward” Gill has not exactly found a middle ground, but he and the orchestra’s board have created a structure that works. Here are the key elements:

• Size of the ensemble: Instead of the 95-105 musicians typically under full-time contract with most major orchestras, San Diego has 80. As the repertoire often demands more, the symphony hires freelancers to fill in the additional positions. And because of San Diego’s proximity to Orange County and Los Angeles, it has access to the largest pool of highly skilled freelance musicians in the U.S.

• Length of Masterworks season: In typical U.S. orchestras, musicians play a core classical series of 26 sets of subscription concerts. As Gill explains, “That’s too much product for most markets.” In San Diego, the Masterworks series is 15 sets of concerts, plus several one-night “classical specials,” with a mix of pops, educational and family concerts making up the rest of the orchestra’s schedule.

• Attitude toward musicians: Unlike Minnesota (or San Diego’s now-silent Orchestra Nova), the San Diego Symphony doesn’t treat its musicians as if they are the enemy. It acknowledges them as its most important asset. Although they still make less money than orchestral musicians in many other communities of similar size, they are getting raises rather than pay cuts, and they have both stability and flexibility.

• Communication and trust — that’s the key.”
Gill said. “The musicians have been good working with us, and they know our financial challenges, they...