# San Diego and Montreal, two orchestras for the same Rafael Payare

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Classical music

The art of sharing a musical director falls to the harmonious work of two strong general managers.



Photo: Gabriel Fournier The OSM conductor, Rafael Payare

Martha Gilmer and Mélanie La Couture are the general managers of the San Diego and Montreal orchestras. Both are committed to making the most of their shared music director, Rafael Payare. In an interview with *Le Devoir* backstage at the Rady Shell in San Diego, they explained the harmonious working relationship between the two institutions.

“We are very lucky because we appreciate each other,” says Martha Gilmer. “I admire Martha a lot. She has immense experience in this field, while I have only just entered it. So there are a multitude of little details on which I consult her: negotiations, managing unforeseen situations…” says Mélanie La Couture.

“Mélanie brings a wealth of expertise. Our business remains a company that we must manage. Today, as general manager, I spend much more time on management than on music, and Mélanie brings valuable strategic vision and expertise. This understanding and respect are essential, as two institutions can sometimes clash,” emphasizes the director of the San Diego Symphony, named manager of the year by Musical America in 2025.

## Shares

At the helm of the prestigious Californian orchestra since 2014, Martha Gilmer spent over three decades with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, where she worked alongside some of the greatest conductors without experiencing any major friction. “Most music directors hold two positions, sometimes an opera house and a symphony orchestra. Surprisingly, there were no tensions with the music directors I worked with. Daniel Barenboim was at the Berlin State Opera; we divided his weeks there and with us, and a routine naturally developed: a few weeks at the opera house; November, February, May with us.”

“The first point of collaboration concerns the sharing of dates,” Mélanie La Couture points out. “This is the first point of contact for our collaboration. Our teams work together, and I don’t believe we’ve encountered any problems in this regard.”

Martha Gilmer notes several facilitating factors, starting with the natural difference in annual calendars between San Diego and Montreal—an undeniable advantage, since "everyone wants their music director to start and finish the season." "We finish at the end of May," Mélanie La Couture points out. "And we start later than you, in October," adds Martha Gilmer. The Californian regular season also boasts 37 weeks of concert activity, compared to 46 in Quebec.

“Touring is where we need to discuss things a bit more,” explains Ms. La Couture. The San Diego Symphony Orchestra doesn’t tour much under normal circumstances, but is actively preparing for its first major European tour this spring. “The OSM obviously has a much larger touring schedule than ours. If they go to China, we don’t; we consult with each other. You toured Europe during the festival season, and we’ll be going to different cities and venues this spring. Hamburg is our only point of commonality,” explains Martha Gilmer.

For Rafael Payare, the pace is particularly intense: barely back from Asia with the OSM, he'll be heading off to Europe again with his San Diego musicians. Meticulously planned with the biggest international broadcasters, this schedule is usually orchestrated two to three years in advance. "It took forever! We started discussions two years ago, but finalizing the cities took a lot of time. We had to be there on a public holiday, May 1st , which complicated things, then everything suddenly fell into place. We each work with artists' agencies," confirms Martha Gilmer.

## Californian produce

The conductor’s personal management office thus serves as an essential hub for coordinating schedules on both sides of the border. “On our end, we speak with Rafael’s agent and tell him, ‘He has 16 weeks in Montréal; here are the 16 weeks we would like.’ He then checks with Martha or her team and gets back to us to confirm or adjust the weeks. That’s how we finalize the calendar,” explains Mélanie La Couture. “We need Rafael for our gala in November, but we can be flexible about the month of May,” adds Martha Gilmer.

San Diego readily acknowledges Montreal's "rich discography" when it comes to recording. "As far as what Rafael conducts in concert each week is concerned, overlap is of little importance. We need to coordinate the recordings. Since he knows both orchestras, he already anticipates these choices in his planning. We have a much more open field. Shostakovich is therefore more our domain, while French music is yours. You've also played Mahler, so we're moving away from that to explore other repertoires," says Martha Gilmer.

The exceptional joint concert by the two orchestras at the Rady Shell—bringing together some 140 musicians side by side—was the spectacular highlight of this California tour. Martha Gilmer praised the shared desire to "put together a tour so that the OSM doesn't just come to San Diego" and made no secret of her delight at the reception in San Francisco and Los Angeles: "It's wonderful because it builds connections in a great state. The more our three orchestras collaborate on these kinds of initiatives, the better. It puts California in the spotlight, which I'm very happy about."

Martha Gilmer confirms the remarkable feat achieved by Mélanie La Couture and her team, who succeeded in inviting the OSM to perform at the iconic Walt Disney Concert Hall. “Los Angeles is a special case: they don’t usually invite other ensembles. When orchestras are touring here, they play in San Francisco, sometimes in Santa Barbara, then in Orange County, at the Segerstrom Center, sometimes here, and then in Palm Desert. That’s the usual circuit. When I was in Chicago, we never played at Disney Hall. We played San Francisco, Santa Barbara, and San Diego.”

“We met with the Colburn Foundation, and the director explained that she had specifically asked to sponsor the arrival of international orchestras. That’s what allowed us to be programmed there,” says Mélanie La Couture, visibly delighted by this remarkable stroke of genius.