The OSM ends with a bang in San Diego

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Concert review



Photo: Gary Payne The OSM and the San Diego Orchestra at Rady Shell, San Diego

The Montreal Symphony Orchestra (OSM) concluded its California tour with two contrasting concerts in San Diego, the city where Rafael Payare is also the music director. The triumph there was not only artistic.

The flags of the United States and Canada are displayed side-by-side on the Rady Shell's giant screens, ahead of the final concert shared between the Montreal and San Diego orchestras on Friday evening. In their pre-concert remarks, Martha Gilmer and Mélanie La Couture, executive directors of the two institutions, emphasized the symbolic significance of this reunion in these troubled times. They also recalled the joint commission of *Symphony No. 6, "Monarch,"* from composer Jimmy López , inspired by the monarch butterfly's cross-border migration—a concept that also encompasses Mexico. The work will be premiered at the end of the season.

This evening, dedicated to sharing, resulted in a spectacular event on the outdoor stage inaugurated in San Diego in 2022. After Bartók's The *Miraculous Mandarin* Suite by the San Diego Orchestra and the *Second Suite* from *Daphnis and Chloe* by the OSM, the two ensembles joined forces for Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* and Respighi's *Pines of Rome* .



Photo: Gary Payne The brass section responding to the orchestra from the yacht of a generous patron sailing along the stage.

The formidable *Scythian Suite* , performed by the OSM in Lanaudière this summer , sounded even more dazzling with 140 musicians. The highlight of the evening, however, remained *The Pines of Rome* , with Rafael Payare's somewhat audacious idea in *The Pines of the Appian Way* : placing the brass section of the banda, responding to the orchestra, on the yacht of a generous patron sailing alongside the stage, all without the slightest synchronization. Broadcast on screens, this unique and unexpected moment took the audience's breath away. A special mention goes to the English horn soloist of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra in Respighi: her solo immediately captivated the listener.

In the room

Beyond the stage, a genuine partnership has developed between the two organizations. The previous evening, the OSM performed at the Jacobs Music Center, a magnificently renovated hall inaugurated in 2024, a true success story in heritage preservation. The acoustics remain as captivating as ever: the spaciousness between the music stands makes for a particularly clear and balanced listening experience.

Just as in Los Angeles, the Montreal ensemble made a strong impression on the audience, though for different reasons than in Shostakovich's 10th Symphony. In Stravinsky's *The Firebird* , it was the delicacy of the string textures and the subtlety of *the piano* , *pianissimo* , and softer nuances that distinguished their performance. The remarkable playing of several sections was also noteworthy, particularly the trumpets, bassoons, and, of course, the flutes and clarinets.

Conversely, the evening highlighted the usefulness of a mediation approach for the audience, now well-established by the OSM but absent in San Diego: projecting the titles of the different episodes of a ballet during the performance considerably enhances the clarity and enjoyment of the work. This technique would have been equally effective on the outdoor screens for *The Miraculous Mandarin* or the movements of the *Scythian Suite* .

As for Samy Moussa's *Elysium* , it was the most accomplished performance offered by the OSM and Rafael Payare: freer, carried by an even more powerful energy. The same can be said for Tchaikovsky's *Violin Concerto* , with Leonidas Kavakos at his zenith, superbly precise, always masterfully exploring the dynamic contrasts. So brilliant, in fact, that, unusually, some audience members applauded him mid-cadenza of the first movement after an impressive high note. Far from being thrown off, the violinist appeared even more commanding and assertive afterward. He will reunite with the OSM for this same work in Tokyo next March.

Christophe Huss was a guest of the OSM during its tour in California.

The OSM in San Diego

Concert at the Jacobs Center. Moussa: *Elysium* . Tchaikovsky: *Violin Concerto* . Stravinsky: *The Firebird* . Leonidas Kavakos (violin), Rafael Payare (conductor). October 29, 2026.