

THINGS TO DO > MUSIC AND CONCERTS

San Diego Symphony's Brahms Festival a dream come true for the orchestra

The five concerts at Jacobs Music Center will feature guest soloists, including violin star Leonidas Kavakos and a choir



San Diego Symphony President/CEO Martha Gilmer and Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare work closely putting together each new season for the orchestra. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)



By **BETH WOOD**

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The San Diego Symphony's Brahms Festival will be special in several ways.

It's the first festival the symphony has presented since before the pandemic shutdown, and the first to be held in the orchestra's recently renovated Jacobs Music Center. The Brahms Festival, which kicks off Friday and runs through March 7, will feature an orchestra ready and eager for such an intense workout.

The Brahms Festival is a deep dive into the work of the revered 19th-century German composer. The idea started as a gleam in the eye of San Diego Symphony Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare about five years ago.

"I was — on purpose — getting the orchestra to not play a lot of Brahms for a little bit," Payare said. "And the pandemic did the job to spread that out. This is only our second season after our beautiful home was reopened and it's time to come back to festival mode.

"We have our beautiful hall, and now we have the choral terrace and a wonderful chorus. The festival will be an immersion into Brahms' music. We will be able to put all that time when we didn't play Brahms to now dive all together into his music. Everything aligns."

The choral terrace was built at the rear of the stage and is used for additional audience seating for non-choral concerts. It will be brimming with 86 vocalists on Friday and next Sunday for one of Brahms' most famous pieces, A German Requiem. On Saturday, the orchestra will play his first and second symphonies.

The following weekend, Brahms' third and fourth symphonies will be featured along with his Violin Concerto. On March 8, the orchestra will play the same program at a sold-out concert at Palm Desert's McCallum Theatre.

San Diego Symphony CEO Martha Gilmer notes that the Brahms festival will allow audiences to compare and contrast the composer's work.

"The audience will hear the differences in instrumentation that he uses in the sound of the orchestra, in the soloistic writing, and in the colors that he creates. It's a way to immerse yourself over the two weeks," she said.

'Joachim saved us'

Brahms' violin concerto is considered one of the greatest of all time. That makes it doubly exciting that the orchestra will bring in one of the world's greatest violinists, Leonidas Kavakos, to play it. Kavakos was also an element of everything aligning for the Brahms Festival, according to Payare.

"The first time I heard Leonidas live, I was in Switzerland," Payare recalled. "He was performing Brahms' Violin Concerto with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. He was absolutely great and, again, the stars aligned. It's a beautiful cherry on top that at the first concert I heard Leonidas live, he was playing the piece he'll now play with us."



Violinist Leonidas Kavakos will perform Brahms' Violin Concerto with the San Diego Symphony as part of its upcoming Brahms Festival. (Marco Borggreve)

The Athens-born, Switzerland-based Kavakos is an international star as both a violinist and conductor. Among his dozen-plus recordings are the four popular albums he's made with pianist Emmanuel Ax and cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

Although Kavakos has performed in San Diego often enough to say he enjoys "its vibe," he is making his debut with the San Diego Symphony on March 6 and will also perform the violin concerto here on March 7 and 8.

Brahms wrote his first and only completed violin concerto for his close friend, violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim. They worked together on the piece and created an enduring masterpiece.

"Joachim saved us all!" said Kavakos, speaking from his home in Zurich.

"I have looked at the facsimile of the score of the original concerto. Brahms' initial ideas were impossible to play on violin, because he was a pianist. While the musical material and ideas were all fantastic and eternal, the actual writing for violin was completely impossible.

"Thanks to his friend, Joachim, it's possible to play. It's still extremely hard because of the language, the idiom of Brahms' music. There is this beautiful line in the violin's very high register, in dialog with the woodwinds. That was another contribution of Joachim to Brahms' concerto. And for me, this is one of the most – if not the most – beautiful moments of the whole piece."



French-Canadian mezzo-soprano Julie Boulianne is one of the featured vocal soloists for San Diego Symphony's performance of Brahms' German Requiem next weekend. (Julien Faugère)

‘Always more to dig into’

The festival's opening-weekend German Requiem will feature French-Canadian mezzo-soprano Julie Boulianne, in her San Diego Symphony debut, and American bass-baritone Michael Sumuel.

"The German Requiem is one of the greatest choral works probably ever written," symphony CEO Gilmer said. "It has beautiful choral writing, beautiful harmonies and is incredibly moving.

"It's very different from Verdi's Requiem, for instance, which has a different kind of power — a 'shaking your fist at heaven' kind of power. I don't believe Brahms was a religious man, but he still relied on and represented the great German choral tradition. His requiem is about death, but it still finds joy."

All festival performances will offer a pre-concert talk by San Diego Symphony Creative Consultant Gerard McBurney one hour before each concert.

For Payare, conducting a festival entirely devoted to Brahms is a dream come true.

"Playing and conducting Brahms is one of those things when you just know it's right," Payare said.

"It was very funny when we were finishing a rehearsal last season of his Second Symphony. Concertmaster Jeff Thayer and I looked at each other, and Jeff just smiled, like: 'Oh, my god! Brahms is such a beautiful musician and composer.'

"When you dive into Brahms — and there is always more to dig into — it's always a joy," Payare said. "And the more you get into his world, the more you feel that you are surrounded by a wonderful hug."

San Diego Symphony's Brahms Festival

Concerts:

- Brahms' A German Requiem, featuring Music Director Rafael Payare, soprano Julie Boulianne and bass-baritone Michael Sumuel. 7:30 p.m. Friday ; 2 p.m. next Sunday.
- Brahms' Symphony No. 1 and Brahms' Symphony No. 2, featuring Music Director Rafael Payare. 7:30 p.m. Saturday.
- Brahms' Violin Concerto in D major, Brahms' Symphony No. 4 in E minor, featuring Music Director Rafael Payare and violinist Leonidas Kavakos. 7:30 p.m. March 6.
- Brahms' Symphony No. 3 in F major, Brahms' Violin Concerto in D major, featuring Music Director Rafael Payare and violinist Leonidas Kavakos. 7:30 p.m. March 7.

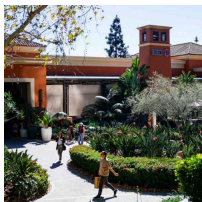
Where: Miller Family Theater, Jacobs Music Center, 750 B. Street, downtown.

Tickets: \$30-\$108

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