

Carnegie Hall encore concert will be a Big Apple treat for San Diego Symphony members: 'It's humbling'

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The orchestra will preview its New York performance with a Saturday concert San Diego at The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park. Cello great Alisa Weilerstein will be the featured soloist at both events



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San Diego, CA - September 22: Members of the San Diego Symphony from left to right, Susan Wulff, associate principal bass, Jing Yan Bowcott, violin, Hernan Constantino, violin, Rachel Fields, librarian, Pei-Chun Tsai, violin, and Aaron Blick, bass, pose for a photo at The Rady Shell on Friday, Sept. 22, 2023 in San Diego, CA. (Meg McLaughlin / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

New York, New York / It comes down to reality / No place in the world that could compare.

The San Diego Symphony's Oct. 13 concert repertoire at Carnegie Hall will not include any newly arranged classics by Frank Sinatra, Jay Z or Billy Joel, whose Big Apple-themed song lyrics have been combined in the sentence above. But it will undeniably be a celebratory event and a prized new feather in the collective cap of the 113-year-old orchestra.

The New York performance will be previewed with a San Diego concert on Saturday at The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park. Both will feature Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Carlos Simon's Wake Up: A Concerto for Orchestra — which is receiving its San Diego premiere — and Dvorak's Cello Concerto in B minor, with Alisa Weilerstein as the featured soloist.

For some of the symphony's newer members, the upcoming Carnegie Hall concert marks a heady first. For those musicians who were already aboard when the orchestra made its 2013 debut at the storied Manhattan venue, it's a most welcome return. About a third of the orchestra's members will be accompanied on the trip by their partners, children, other family members and friends.

"Being able to stand on the very same stage that has hosted legendary musicians for centuries is overwhelmingly inspiring and humbling," said violinist Jing Yan Bowcott, a member of the symphony since 2006. "My husband is coming with me this time and I can't wait to share the experience with him."

"When we played there a decade ago it was a pivotal moment in the history of the San Diego Symphony," said associate principal bassist Susan Wulff. "This is another pivotal moment in our growth as an organization and I'm truly excited."

So is Wulff's fellow bassist, Aaron Blick, a 2020 graduate of USC's Thornton School of Music.

"I was not with the orchestra in 2013, but I am so excited to be a part of it this year!" Blick said. "What gets me very excited is putting on a world-class performance in one of the world's most famous classical-music spaces."

The Oct. 13 performance marks the symphony's second-ever concert at Carnegie Hall. The 3,671-seat concert hall opened in 1891 with already legendary Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky conducting his Marche Solennelle, a reworked version of his Coronation March.

Since then, everyone from Gustav Mahler and Béla Bartók to John Philip Sousa and The Beatles have performed there. So has the Montreal Symphony, whose new music director — Rafael Payare — has led the San Diego Symphony since 2019.

“When I became the music director here five years ago, we always talked about: ‘What do we want to do with the orchestra *beyond* San Diego’?” Payare recalled.

“One goal was to tour outside and within the U.S. Another goal was to go back to Carnegie Hall. Going back there was floating even before I got here — and, then, the pandemic hit. We reserved this (Oct. 13) date about a year ago and we confirmed it in December. This is a wonderful orchestra and they should play there more often.”

Martha Gilmer, San Diego Symphony’s CEO since 2014, readily agreed.

“The 10-year mark is an important milestone for the symphony to return to Carnegie Hall,” she said. “It’s one of the world’s most iconic concert venues. And it’s no accident that we are returning 10 years — to the month — after the orchestra first played there. For musicians, whether it’s the first time or the 10th time, playing Carnegie Hall is inspiring.”

Those sentiments are seconded by the six San Diego Symphony members profiled in this article. As they gathered for a recent backstage photo shoot at The Shell, the camaraderie between them was matched by their anticipation about the upcoming Carnegie Hall concert.

Jing Yan Bowcott, violinist

Birthplace: Hohhot, the capital city of Inner Mongolia

Music education: Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, Royal Academy of Music in London, Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University

First professional orchestra gig: Beijing Symphony Orchestra

Joined the San Diego Symphony: 2006

Earliest musical memory: “Both my parents were musicians. My earliest musical memory is our nightly entertainment in the living room when I was 4, singing with my brother to dad’s accordion playing while mom danced. My dad still has a recording from one of our ‘performances.’”

First musical epiphany: “I was probably 17 or 18 and had already gone through years of schooling for music at this time. So, of course, I was in the conservatory because I was good at this ‘violin thing.’ The China Youth Symphony I was part of did a tour in Beijing. At one of the sold-out concerts ... I had butterflies in my stomach when the audience (gave us) a standing ovation. At that moment, I thought that I would like to always feel this way and this is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Why have you dedicated yourself to music? “Music connects people in a way that words can’t.”

Most memorable day job: “I once worked at a jewelry store in Chicago. I was terrible at it, but I enjoyed looking at pretty jewelry all day long!”

Favorite non-classical music or song: “I listen to Lady Gaga and jazz.”

Pre-concert ritual: “An hour before I leave for a concert, I like to warm up and practice in my concert attire. If I am performing standing, I make sure to practice wearing the right shoes.”

What makes playing at Carnegie Hall so special? “Carnegie Hall is one of the most prestigious music venues in the world. It is a national landmark. The stunning design, the acoustics, the history and its legacy — it is such an honor for any musician to play at the Carnegie. For me, personally, playing at the Carnegie Hall fulfills my American Dream. Not to sound cheesy or cliché, but when I was a teenager, I dreamed of going to America to study music. Then that dream became ‘winning a job in an American orchestra’ ... I am actually living my dream! I remember the last time I was at Carnegie with the orchestra in 2013, standing on the stage and trying to take it all in. I was super excited because I finally made it to Carnegie Hall! My husband is coming with me this time, so I can’t wait to share this experience with him.”

Susan Wulff, associate principal bassist

Birthplace: Sacramento

Music education: University of Southern California in Los Angeles; California State University, Sacramento

First professional orchestra gig: Los Angeles Opera Orchestra and New West Symphony

Joined the San Diego Symphony: 1998

Earliest musical memory: “I grew up in dance studios since the age of 6. When I became part of the Sacramento Apprentice Ballet Company, our classes would be led by our instructor and a musician that would play the grand piano. I remember feeling like my abilities as a dancer were enhanced while listening to the music coming from the piano. My movements became more focused, energized and heartfelt. My professional career as a classical double bassist grew out of a passion for playing rock, pop, reggae, musical theater and jazz on the electric bass from the age of 10.”

First musical epiphany: “Twenty years ago listening to the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Sir Simon Rattle at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, I closed my eyes to take in all the sound and a magical feeling washed over me. This is the auditory representation of people getting along! One-hundred-plus orchestra members were setting aside their differences, perspectives, biases and judgments to create a harmonious and beautiful piece of music at an incredibly crafted level, where each individual truly was part of the greater whole.”

Most memorable day job: “During my summer break at USC, I took a waitress job at El Torito along with my regular job at the bank opening new accounts for customers. It was at El Torito that I learned how to make guacamole. I also quickly learned carrying a tray of margaritas can be deceptively unstable — as the whole thing proceeded to slowly drop onto a customer, on Mother’s Day. It took a bit of humility and forgiveness to myself to come back to work the next day.”

Favorite non-classical music or song: “Listening to music for me is fluid. Therefore, the musicians that get the most play on my list are the ones that have the most diverse character in their style. Childish Gambino and Esperanza Spalding come to mind immediately.”

Pre-concert ritual: “The methodical way in which each musician takes their instrument out of their case, tunes it, warms up and settles themselves on stage is all a very personal ritual. One of my favorite grounding exercises I play after tuning my bass is called ‘Vomit.’ Essentially, it is a scale played on one string, sliding back and forth between notes, while playing a neighboring open string to create a drone for which to tune against.”

What makes playing at Carnegie Hall so special? “It’s mind-blowing to think of all the musical greats that have performed there. When we played there a decade ago. I remember feeling like the hall had a clear historical energy.”

Hernan Constantino, violinist

Birthplace: Manila, the Philippines

Music education: Philadelphia College of Performing Arts

First professional orchestra gig: Pennsylvania Ballet Orchestra

Joined the San Diego Symphony: 1990

Earliest musical memory: “My father was an extreme fan of classical music, especially all the violin repertoire. Growing up, our house was always filled with classical music. I have learned to appreciate the beauty of listening to performances and what it takes to achieve this

level. Music continues to expand my imagination and allows me to experience the various emotions and expressions in my playing.”

First musical epiphany: “When I was 14, on the biggest stage in Manila, at the Cultural Center of the Philippines ... it was a performance as a first-place-winner in the first instrumental competition ever held in my country. I performed in front of my family and the former President and First Lady of our

country, Ferdinand Marcos, Sr., and Imelda Marcos.”

Why have you dedicated yourself to music? “I am fortunate to make a living playing what I love the most. At my age, 56, I strive to still improve myself with my skills. And with my experience, I have been teaching and sharing my knowledge with young aspiring musicians. It still inspires me to see progress with kids and the joy it brings them — the same joy I experienced at their age.”

Most memorable day job: “In music, there are many jobs that are just jobs but some were really good jobs. It’s the good jobs that keep us working hard, knowing there will be another good day in front of us.”

Favorite non-classical music or song: “I adore Tony Bennett and Nat ‘King’ Cole. And I like the band Queen. “

Pre-concert ritual: “Be on time, have your instrument and music.”

What makes playing at Carnegie Hall so special? “I was part of our 2013 concert there. Thinking about the history and the great performances on that stage — and being able to play in the most famous concert hall — was an incredible experience. I am excited to visit New York where my youngest daughter now resides and works for NBC as a journalist. I look forward to seeing my good friend from college. My two cousins will also be visiting New York at that time, along with my wife’s sister’s family. It just worked out with everyone’s schedule.”

Rachel Fields, music librarian

Birthplace: Charlevoix, Mich.

Music education: New England Conservatory in Boston

First professional orchestra gig: Librarian of the Spokane Symphony

Joined the San Diego Symphony: 2013

First instrument: “I’ve been singing all my life, but if we’re talking strictly about instruments, I started on piano when I was 7, then started on the cornet when I was 11 and switched to trumpet a year later.”

What drew you to become an orchestra librarian? “I was drawn to library work because it was a reliable way to earn a living through undergrad and after graduation when I was struggling to come up with enough money and time to take trumpet auditions I enjoy being behind-the-scenes. And the detail work and research that are so much a part of this job suit my personality. Knowing that my work plays a part in the orchestra’s performance is very rewarding. However, I’m always eager to perform as a soprano solo vocalist and I sing regularly in local choirs.”

Earliest musical memory: “Being from a rural area, we didn’t attend any symphony concerts or see many professional groups, but we had a darn good city band in Charlevoix. My dad played drums in the percussion section — and still does!”

First musical epiphany: “When I was about 5 or 6, my older sister was in a high school production of ‘Godspell.’ She sang ‘By My Side,’ which has a really beautiful, wistful quality that had the audience in tears each night. That’s how I discovered my love of musical theater and singing. Music is as necessary to life as the air we breathe.”

Favorite non-classical piece of music or song: “My favorites change as often as my mood, but currently it’s Joni Mitchell’s ‘Cactus Tree’ from her first album, ‘Song to a Seagull.’ I especially admire the music and lyrics of Joni, Stephen Sondheim, Jason Robert Brown, Queen and ‘Weird Al’ Yankovic.”

Most memorable day job: “On my summers off in college, I worked at a fish market, John Cross Fisheries in my hometown, selling Lake Michigan whitefish, trout, perch, walleye, and occasionally salmon when they caught them. The work was hard, being on my feet all day, helping customers who sometimes had ridiculous demands ... It was definitely a lesson in patience and fortitude.”

Pre-concert rituals: “Not really, but you can always find me near the coffee!”

What makes playing at Carnegie Hall so special? “Our principal librarian, Courtney Cohen, was the librarian-on-duty for the symphony’s 2013 Carnegie Hall concert. In 2005, I had the privilege to perform there on trumpet with the New England Conservatory Wind Ensemble. I’m not sure which was better — the view from the stage or the view from the audience. It’s one of the most beautiful halls I’ve played in.”

Pei-Chun Tsai, violinist

Birthplace: Tainan, Taiwan

Music education: The Juilliard School in New York, City University of New York

First professional orchestra gig: San Diego Symphony, since 2006

Earliest musical memory: “My sister and me playing together with me on violin and her on piano. She is a physician now, but I remain a violinist. I always enjoyed playing the violin more than the other youth activities that were standard for young Taiwanese kids. I just knew this is what I wanted to do.

First musical epiphany: “I loved hearing the energy that an entire orchestra created and felt together — a truly memorable feeling. And I attended many concerts at Carnegie Hall when I was a Juilliard student. The most memorable was Anne-Sophie Mutter playing all the Beethoven violin sonatas.”

Why have you dedicated yourself to music? “I want to share classical music and all the nuance and beauty it contains with people. I’m lucky to be within it, but it can be transformative for players and audiences alike.”

Most memorable day job: “Being a hostess at a Greek Restaurant while I was a student at Juilliard. It was fun and different, but it was not for me.”

Favorite non-classical music or song: “Aguas de Marco” by Antonio Carlos “Tom” Jobim

Pre-concert ritual: “Warm up fully, eat healthy, and relax.”

What makes playing at Carnegie Hall so special? “It’s one of the best and most famous concert halls in the world and the sound is really incredible. It was exciting. And, having attended Juilliard in New York City, I know the neighborhood and the hall very well. It was kind of like going home. But because I’d never been on the stage — just in the audience — it was incredible to play there in 2013. Everybody in the orchestra was so focused and everybody played their very, very best.”

Aaron Blick, bassist

Birthplace: Los Angeles

Music education: Northwestern University’s Bienen School of Music in Chicago, USC Thornton School of Music in Los Angeles

First professional orchestra gig: San Diego Symphony, starting in 2022

Earliest musical memory: “Sitting on a piano bench next to my aunt and uncle, a jazz singer and a pianist, respectively. I used to try and imitate my uncle by banging on the keys very hard even though it probably sounded like nonsense. As a listener, my parents would always play the Beatles and Mozart, along with a wide variety of different things, for me in the car when they took me to school every day.”

First musical epiphany: “My first true musical epiphany was sometime in my first year of college. It was the realization that I really wanted to commit to pursuing music as a career, and that it wasn’t just something I loved to do. Sitting in general education classes, I always found myself thinking about how much more engaging my music classes were to me. That realization gave me the kick to put all of my energy and focus into going down this path. It was the start of every other musical epiphany I’ve had since.”

Most memorable day job: “When I was in high school, I worked part time as an umpire at my local Little League. It was fun because I love baseball, but I remember constantly having to put up with parents and coaches yelling at me — and even had to eject a few from games, which was pretty satisfying at the time. It’s crazy how worked up parents can get over 6-year-olds hitting a ball off a tee! But overall, I would say it was a very fun and positive experience.”

Favorite non-classical music or song: “I feel like this changes for me constantly since I always try mix up what I’m listening to. But anything by the Beatles holds a special place in my heart.”

Pre-concert ritual: “I was a pitcher on my high school baseball team so I tend to be pretty consistent — and sometimes superstitious — about my warm-up routine. Mostly, I just like to make sure I arrive with at least 30 minutes of time to warm-up and relax before we go on stage, so that — physically and mentally — there’s nothing holding me back from giving my all once we start the show.”

What makes playing at Carnegie Hall so special? “This will be my very first time stepping through the doors of Carnegie Hall period, both as a player and listener. As musicians we’re always told how it’s a bucket-list career event, so I’m so excited to get to check this one off! What gets me very excited is putting on a world-class performance in one of the world’s most famous classical music spaces. But one step beyond that, sharing the special sound and energy that we in the San Diego Symphony get to produce with each other every day, with an audience 3,000 miles away from our home, that would otherwise have very little opportunity to experience our sound and get a little of that: ‘Let’s show them how we do it in San Diego!’ energy.”

San Diego Symphony: Carnegie Hall Preview — Weilerstein Plays Dvorak

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, 222 Marina Park Way, downtown

Tickets: \$25-\$90

Phone: (619) 235-0804

Online: theshell.org