# "Sound of Two Cities" Exemplifies San Diego Symphony's Beyond Borders Initiative

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Rafael Payare conducts the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal | *Credit: Antoine Saito*

In 2026, California's oldest orchestra hatched an ambitious, even visionary idea: mend the recently inflamed relations between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada via periodic border-blurring programming. As an orchestra serving a binational frontier, with a music director, Rafael Payare, who also leads the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (OSM), arguably Canada's finest, the San Diego Symphony (SDSO) was the natural host for Beyond Borders: North American Music Initiative.

Though the SDSO's Mexico bridge-building efforts go back decades, the first official concert of the Beyond Borders initiative was its performance of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony and Arturo Márquez's Danzón No. 2 on October 7 at Centro Cultural Tijuana. Canada's turn came October 29 when, following solo stops in San Francisco (October 25) and Los Angeles (October 27), the OSM impressed at Jacobs Music Center in its first performance in San Diego since 2016, via Samy Moussa's intriguingly powerful *Elysium*, Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto (performed by the consummate Leonidas Kavakos), and the complete ballet music for Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird*.



Rafael Payare | *Credit: Todd Rosenberg*

The following night's free "Sound of Two Cities" concert offered a rare opportunity to see what two distinguished orchestras sound like when paired in the wild. Partly because outdoor venues cannot replicate the natural resonance of acoustic halls like Jacobs Music Center, the amplified Rady Shell at Jacobs Park favors more extroverted programming. The Friday night program delivered a generous helping of high-decibel works — Béla Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* suite, Sergei Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite*, Ottorino Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, and, lowering the temperature, Maurice Ravel's Suite No. 2 from *Daphnis et Chloé* — with the 130-odd assembled musicians providing additional sonic boost in the post-intermission pieces (Prokofiev and Respighi). A more literal-minded Beyond Borders program might have featured, say, Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, Silvestre Revueltas's *Sensemayá*, and a piece by Claude Champagne, Claude Vivier, or even Howard Shore. But as a vehicle for wowing audiences and for 49th-parallel bonding, this strapping program was hard to beat.



The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park after dark | *Courtesy of San Diego Symphony*

Despite a first group rehearsal only the day before, the two tight ensembles meshed well, musically and socially. Leading off, the hosts took on Bartók's explosive suite, last performed by the SDSO in 2023. There isn't much the versatile San Diegans can't do well, but *The Miraculous Mandarin* played to two of their obvious strengths: an unusually broad palette and sheer muscle when it's needed. The orchestra unleashed the night's greatest sonic onslaught but always with taut discipline and virtuosic highlights, most notably Sheryl Renk's sensuous clarinet playing, injecting redemptive humanity into Bartók's violent score.

The SDSO has itself performed Ravel's Second Suite from *Daphnis et Chloé* with luminosity and idiomatic color (memorably, to christen the sonically redeemed Jacobs Music Center in 2024), but the OSM carries it in its DNA. Its assured, well-gauged performance balanced ravishing string playing with color-rich woodwinds (especially Timothy Hutchins's masterful flute work).

After intermission, the two orchestras' musicians modeled cross-border diplomacy by taking alternating positions by stand and chatting amiably. Between the two jointly played works, OSM concertmaster Andrew Wan yielded first chair to SDSO concertmaster Jeff Thayer, who'd seated himself second after intermission; other principals likewise traded seats. Where

the OSM's principals took the lead in Prokofiev, the SDSO's returned the favor for the Respighi. Mutual respect was the order of the day.

Rafael Payare leads the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal in a performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*.

Easily the least-performed piece on the program, Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* (1914–1915) was rejected in its original form (the ballet *Ala and Lolli*) by Sergei Diaghilev, who commissioned it (and also Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* a few years earlier) but saw too much of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in it. Prokofiev later acknowledged a similarity. But a score that revels in every kind of instrumental combination needs no apologies. In the hands of Payare and a stage full of musicians playing with disarming unity, *Scythian Suite*was urgent, thrilling fun.

Respighi's *Pines of Rome* has earned a bad rap for the double offense of being among the repertoire's most reliable crowd-pleasers and of sinning against the Austro-Germanic ideal of organic thematic development. But powered by the two orchestras' combined heft and outstanding contributions from the woodwinds and brass (nine brass players performed from a yacht floating nearby), Payare, master of the "long line," gave Respighi's well-wrought masterwork Mahlerian weight. This listener's never heard a better one.



Rafael Payare conducts the San Diego Symphony at Jacobs Music Center | *Credit: Todd Rosenberg*

The Beyond Borders program resumes in June with the U.S. premiere of SDSO composer-in-residence Jimmy López's Symphony No. 6, *Monarch*. Though the Peruvian López's career has had multiple intersections with Mexico, *Monarch*'s relevance to Beyond Borders stems from its provenance — it was co-commissioned by the SDSO and the OSM — and above all from its theme: the 3,000-mile border-defying migration of generations of monarch butterflies, a politically inconvenient metaphor if there ever was one.

In gentler times, the onstage entente the Rady Shell audience witnessed October 30 between Payare's two ace ensembles would have been only a benign gesture like others before it. Gustavo Dudamel merged his Los Angeles Philharmonic and Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra on stage for his 2014 TchaikovskyFest, and 2024 saw similar one-time mergers between Taiwanese and Vietnamese orchestras (in Hanoi) and Singaporean and Australian symphonies (in Singapore). But when friendships assumed are suddenly imperiled, events like Friday night's feel like essential protests of hope. For that, the musicians deserve our thanks.

Based in San Diego, **Paul Bodine** has been writing about music – from classical to pop/rock — for over 30 years for publications such as *Classical Voice North America, Times of San Diego, Orange County Register,* and *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. Among the artists he's interviewed are Joshua Bell, Herbert Blomstedt, Alisa Weilerstein, Augustin Hadelich, Marc-Andre Hamelin, Rafael Payare, Isabel Leonard, Ivan Fischer, Anthony Davis, and Francesco Piemontesi. He has a bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago and a master's from Johns Hopkins University.