San Diego Symphony
RAFAEL PAYARE | MUSIC & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

PRESS RELEASE

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San Diego Symphony Announces 2026-27 Conducting Fellowship Participants

Five accomplished emerging conductors selected for program advancing the next generation of orchestral leadership

San Diego, CA — The San Diego Symphony has announced five conductors selected to participate in its Conducting Fellowship Program for the 2026–27 season. Conceived by Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare in 2025, the initiative provides accomplished emerging conductors with opportunities to develop their artistic leadership, work alongside an internationally distinguished orchestra, and gain firsthand experience in the many dimensions of leading a major cultural institution. San Diego Symphony's Conducting Fellowship Program is generously supported by Gordon Brodfeuhrer.

The five fellows selected for this season are **Kalena Bovell, Michelle Di Russo, Chad Goodman, Gerald Karni**, and **Jesús Uzcátegui**. Bovell and Karni return for a second year in the program. Together, they bring distinctive artistic perspectives, international experience, and a shared commitment to the future of orchestral music.

Each fellow receives mentorship from Payare and works closely with the Symphony's musicians and artistic, education, and community engagement teams. Their responsibilities include conducting performances at Jacobs Music Center and leading education and community engagement programs throughout the San Diego region.

Payare's vision for the fellowship was shaped in part by his own experiences working with influential conductors including Lorin Maazel and Claudio Abbado, whose mentorship helped shape his artistic development.

"Mentorship is at the heart of what makes music flourish. We're giving gifted young conductors the opportunity to grow artistically, to collaborate with extraordinary musicians and administrators, to

experience how a wonderful institution runs, and to find their own voice on the podium," said Payare.

The program is already demonstrating its potential to help advance the next generation of orchestral leaders. Members of the inaugural 2025–26 cohort are building momentum in their careers, with new appointments, guest conducting engagements, and recognition from the international music community.

> **Na'Zir McFadden** is Assistant Conductor of the Jacksonville Symphony and will lead three performances with the Louisville Orchestra this season as part of its Nightlites and Around the Globe series. He is the recipient of the 2026 Sphinx Medal of Excellence and a Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Award.
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> **Nathan Aspinall** was recently named an Artistic Partner of Symphony San Jose, where he will conduct two subscription concerts, including the orchestra's season finale performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. He continues to serve as Resident Conductor of the Nashville Symphony.
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> **Sunny Xia** begins her appointment this season as First Kapellmeisterin of Opéra national du Rhin in Strasbourg, where she will conduct performances of *Rigoletto* and *The Love for Three Oranges*.
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> **Tristan Rais-Sherman** made his debut with the Harbin Symphony Orchestra in April 2026. He is one of six candidates being considered for the music director position with the Billings Symphony and has been re-engaged to conduct the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra this season.
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> **Enluis Montes Olivar** makes his debut with the Suzhou Symphony Orchestra in China and the New York Philharmonic at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. In January 2027, he will lead the Orquesta Joven de la Sinfónica de Galicia in a performance of Mahler's First Symphony, *Titan*.

ABOUT THE 2026-27 FELLOWS

Trailblazing Panamanian-American conductor **Kalena Bovell** is the first Black woman to conduct an opera in Canada—the 2023 world-premiere reimagining of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*. Recipient of the 2024 Sphinx Medal of Excellence and a Taki Alsop Conducting Fellowship, Bovell previously served as assistant conductor of the Memphis Symphony. Bovell's 2026–27 season includes major debuts with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Opera Orlando—where she will conduct Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, and the Texas All-State Orchestra. She also returns to the San Diego Symphony for a second season as a Conducting Fellow. Bovell has led performances with the Stuttgarter Philharmoniker, New World Symphony, Hartford Symphony, Louisiana Philharmonic, and the Grant Park Music Festival. She also returned to the Chineke! Orchestra for its 10th anniversary season. Her work with Chineke! at the BBC Proms in 2021 led to her featured appearance on the ensemble's 2022 Coleridge-Taylor album, praised by *The Financial Times* for

"overflowing with descriptive imagination." A poet and advocate for equity, Bovell was raised in Los Angeles, came to music at age 11, began formal music training at 18, and earned degrees from The Hartt School and Chapman University, which named her a Distinguished Alumna in 2021. Her original poem “Tethered Voices” was performed by the University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra and set to music by James Lee, III.

This season, Bovell conducts the Family Concert on October 31 and Music Connects programs in December at Bob Hope Theater at the Marine Air Station Miramar and Las Colinas Women’s Detention and Reentry Facility.

Argentinian-Italian conductor **Michelle Di Russo** is known for her compelling interpretations, passionate musicality, and championing of contemporary music. Di Russo is Music Director of the Delaware Symphony, the sixth in its 120-year history, and began her tenure in the 2025-26 season. She previously held positions with the Fort Worth Symphony, under Music Director Robert Spano, and with the North Carolina Symphony, under Music Director Carlos Miguel Prieto. She is a two-time recipient of The Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Award. She is an alumna of the Aspen Music Festival as well as a former Dudamel Fellow with Los Angeles Philharmonic, mentee of the Taki Alsop Fellowship and a conducting fellow of Chicago Sinfonietta’s Project Inclusion program and The Dallas Opera Hart Institute. Highlights of the 2026-27 season include guest conducting debuts with the New York Philharmonic, Calgary Philharmonic, Puerto Rico Symphony Orchestra, Tucson Symphony, Rice University, and Billings Symphony, as well as return engagements with Festival Napa Valley and the San Diego Symphony. She holds a Doctoral Degree in Orchestral Conducting from Arizona State University.

Di Russo conducts the Family Concert on February 6.

Named Conductor of the Year by the Illinois Council of Orchestras in 2025, **Chad Goodman** has served as Music Director of the Elgin Symphony Orchestra since 2023, receiving praise for taking the orchestra to new artistic heights and dramatically expanding its community impact. Guest conducting highlights include performances with the Minnesota Orchestra, Detroit Symphony, Utah Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Pacific Symphony, and North Carolina Symphony. Goodman previously served as the Conducting Fellow of the New World Symphony and as an Assistant Conductor to the San Francisco Symphony where he worked alongside conductors including Michael Tilson Thomas, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Herbert Blomstedt and Elim Chan. Highlighting his work on and off stage, Forbes hailed him as “An entrepreneur bringing innovation to classical music.” In 2022 he published the book *You Earned a Music Degree. Now What?,* which teaches musicians the business skills needed to successfully navigate the music world. Goodman holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the Eastman School of Music and a Master of Music degree from San Francisco State University.

Goodman conducts the Family Concert on March 6.

Gerald Karni is an internationally acclaimed conductor and violist who has conducted the Lucerne Symphony, Belgrade Philharmonic, and Hamburger Camerata, the latter at Hamburg’s

Elbphilharmonie. As Assistant Conductor with the New York Philharmonic, he led the world premiere of Melinda Wagner's *Elegy Flywheel* at New York's Merkin Hall. Now in his second season as Conducting Fellow with the San Diego Symphony under Music Director Rafael Payare, he will assist Payare on the orchestra's spring 2027 European tour. His 2026-27 debuts include the Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra, Tucson Symphony Orchestra, Brașov Philharmonic, and MÁV Symphony Orchestra Budapest. A three-time Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Award recipient and former Verbier Festival Conducting Fellow, Karni studied conducting at the Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana and viola at Zurich University of the Arts. He founded Zurich's Side-by-Side initiative, pairing orchestral musicians with students, and has been a member of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra under Daniel Barenboim since 2015.

Karni serves as the cover conductor for the San Diego Symphony's European Tour concerts, April 28-May 6.

Venezuelan conductor **Jesús Uzcátegui** serves as Associate Conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica Juan José Landaeta. This October, he led the orchestra on their tour to China, making his conducting debut in China. He will also make his debut with the Guayaquil Philharmonic Orchestra in Ecuador this year. During the 2025-26 season, he assisted several conductors of the New York Philharmonic, including Elim Chan and Gustavo Dudamel. In 2024, he made his debut at the Auditorio Nacional in Mexico City conducting a symphonic tribute to Héctor Lavoe before an audience of over 8,000, following sold-out performances of the same program at the Jorge Isaacs Theater in Colombia. Previously a Dudamel Fellow with the Los Angeles Philharmonic during the 2018–19 season, Uzcátegui assisted Gustavo Dudamel and Plácido Domingo on *Don Carlo* and conducted the LA Phil and Youth Orchestra Los Angeles. In Venezuela, Uzcátegui has conducted all major ensembles affiliated with El Sistema, including the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, the Simón Bolívar Chamber Orchestra, the Teresa Carreño Symphony Orchestra, the Caracas Symphony, and the Venezuelan Symphony Orchestra. Uzcátegui's professional development includes participation in the Lucerne Festival, Gstaad Menuhin Festival Academy, Bard Music Festival, and Malko Competition. He has studied with leading conductors including Neeme Järvi, Valery Gergiev, Christoph Eschenbach, Leon Botstein, Harold Farberman, and Johannes Schlaefli.

Uzcátegui conducts the 2027 School Concerts at Jacobs Music Center, April 14-16.

ABOUT THE SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY CONDUCTING FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The San Diego Symphony Conducting Fellowship Program supports emerging conductors through artistic mentorship, podium experience, and immersion in the life of the orchestra. Fellows work closely with Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare, guest conductors, and Symphony musicians, building professional relationships while developing their craft and musical leadership. Collaboration with the Symphony's artistic, education, and community engagement teams broadens their understanding of orchestral operations and the orchestra's role in the community.

Through conducting family, school, and community concerts, fellows build connections with local audiences and develop their ability to engage listeners of all ages.

ABOUT THE SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY

The San Diego Symphony Orchestra stands among the nation's leading orchestras and serves as a dynamic cultural ambassador for the United States and the San Diego region. Led by President and Chief Executive Officer Martha Gilmer and Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare, its 82 full time, internationally distinguished musicians bring artistry of the highest caliber to audiences at home and abroad. Globally connected and firmly grounded in its community, the Symphony is anchored by two downtown San Diego venues: The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, a striking open-air performance space on the San Diego waterfront, and the recently renovated Jacobs Music Center, a premier concert hall and architectural landmark. The Orchestra presents a broad and ambitious repertoire, from cornerstone symphonic works to major new commissions and collaborations with leading artists of our time, positioning San Diego as a destination for conductors, soloists, composers, and creative partners. Guided by its mission of Changing Lives Through Music, the Symphony's community programs serve more than 65,000 students, families, educators, military service members, and nonprofit partners each year. In schools and neighborhoods throughout the region, its programs integrate music into daily learning and expand access to live performance. Learn more at www.sandiegosymphony.org.

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