

San Diego Symphony's debut European concert tour will put it alongside America's top orchestras

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The tour, which has a seven-figure budget, will see San Diego's 116-year-old orchestra perform in Barcelona, Dublin, Hamburg, Paris and Toulouse. 'I could not be prouder,' says music & artistic director Rafael Payare.



San Diego Symphony, led by Rafael Payare, will perform in five European cities next spring. (Todd Rosenberg)

The San Diego Symphony's announcement today of its 2027 spring concert tour of famed concert halls in Spain, France, Germany and Ireland — the first European tour in the

organization's 116-year history — marks a major step forward in the symphony's quest to join the ranks of America's top-tier orchestras.

The tour will run from April 28 to May 6. It includes a May 3 concert in Germany that is part of "America 250," a series of concerts at Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie that will also feature the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and the Kansas City Symphony.

The San Diego Symphony is the only California orchestra — and the only one from the West Coast — that will perform as part of "America 250." That it is doing so on its maiden European tour elevates the five-city concert trek's significance even higher.

"It's fantastic and I am super excited," said San Diego Symphony Music & Artistic Director Rafael Payare, speaking from Scotland Monday, where he was conducting two concerts by the Montreal Symphony. "I could not be prouder to bring this great San Diego orchestra to these beautiful concert halls in Europe."

His sentiments are shared by Martha Gilmer, the symphony's CEO and president.

"This is a milestone in the development of our orchestra," she said. "The San Diego Symphony has done a (2013) tour of China and performed at Carnegie Hall twice. But a European tour is a hallmark for an American orchestra."

San Diego Symphony will perform in five storied venues abroad. They include: Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona; the National Concert Hall in Dublin; La Seine Musicale in Paris; the historic La Halle aux Grains in Toulouse, France; and Elbphilharmonie, which opened in Hamburg in 2017 and is already regarded as one of the world's greatest venues for classical music.



San Diego Symphony Music & Artistic Director Rafael Payare conducted the national anthem before the San Diego Padres played the Atlanta Braves at Petco Park on June 22, 2026. (K.C. Alfred / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Donors play pivotal role

The European visit represents a major commitment by the symphony's donors, whose underwriting of the tour's seven-figure budget was pivotal in making the four-country concert trek a reality.

"These are significant donors who understand the impact this tour will have and how inspiring it will be to have the orchestra performing in some of the musical capitals of Europe," Gilmer said. "Our donors have made this possible."

The tour's title sponsors are Gary Shekhter, the founder of Helix Electric, and his wife, Jean.

The Shekhters are abroad and could not be reached for comment. In a statement provided by the symphony, the couple said: "Having traveled extensively around the world to hear the best orchestras and classical musicians of our time, we know how important it is for an orchestra to take this step and be heard by audiences across Europe. We are proud of the artistic accomplishments of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra, and it is an honor to be part of such a landmark occasion for San Diego."

Other supporters of the orchestra whose contributions are helping make the tour possible include Una Davis, Ross Caleca and Hayley Janecek, Dorothea Laub, Jaqueline and Jean-Luc Robert, and Laurie Sefton Henson.

“We’re really excited by the trajectory of the San Diego Symphony,” Caleca said Wednesday.

“To be a world-class cultural center, you shouldn’t just consume culture. You should share it and export it to the rest of the world. We’re going to go to as many of these (European) concerts as we can and it’s very nice to share that excitement with other people.”

The symphony’s repertoire for its European tour will offer an array of works designed to showcase the skill and breadth of the orchestra. Featured pieces will include Shostakovich’s Violin Concerto No. 1, Stravinsky’s The Firebird, Bartók’s The Miraculous Mandarin Suite, Bernstein’s Symphonic Dances from “West Side Story” and Mexican composer Gabriela Ortiz’s Kauyumari.

For its concerts in Paris, Toulouse, Hamburg and Dublin, the orchestra will be joined by internationally acclaimed Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos for Shostakovich’s Violin Concerto No. 1. For the tour’s opening concert in Barcelona, the guest soloist will be Spanish pianist Javier Perianes. He will be featured on Schumann’s Piano Concerto in A Minor.

Perianes has guested with the symphony at both its indoor and outdoor concert venues, Jacobs Music Center and The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park. Kavakos was the featured soloist here in February for two of the concerts in the symphony’s four-part Brahms Festival.

“The idea is to have something that makes sense, thematically, but that also represents the ‘San Diego sound’ of the orchestra,” Payare said. “What is that sound? It’s too complicated to put into words! But audiences who come to these concerts will hear it.”

That sound is featured on the symphony’s latest album, “Shostakovich Symphony No. 7,” which was recorded at two spring 2025 concerts at Jacobs Music Center. It was released June 25 by the Brussels-based record label, Delos, and is being exclusively streamed around the world by Apple Music Classical. It will be released Sept. 11 as a 75-minute-plus CD.

“We knew we were going to be doing this tour after the release of the recording,” Payare said. “So, there’s a throughline there that — if people (in Europe) like the sound of the orchestra on the album — they will want to hear the orchestra play live in their cities.”

“It was the right time to release the recording,” Gilmer said, “so this tour is the next obvious step.”

The tour will be a massive undertaking, with more than 90 musicians and the orchestra's support staff flying together. They will be joined by some family members and symphony donors.

"Except for pianos, we are taking every instrument with us from San Diego to Europe," Gilmer said.

"We will play," Payare vowed, "like there's no tomorrow — at at the highest possible level — and transmit that to the audiences in Europe, just like we do in San Diego. A tour like this is very good for bonding the members of an orchestra together and it will make us all stronger. My hope is this is just the beginning of what will be a long international career for the San Diego Symphony."