

San Diego Symphony launches Beyond Borders Initiative and sets free joint concert with Montreal Symphony

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The orchestra, California's oldest, will also perform a free October concert at CECUT in Tijuana



San Diego Symphony Music & Artistic Director Rafael Payare, at right, will conduct the orchestra in San Diego and Tijuana in October, followed by a 2027 tour of Europe. (Meg McLaughlin / The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The San Diego Symphony is further expanding its global reach — just one month after announcing that its debut tour of Europe next year — with today's official launch of its Beyond Borders: North American Music Initiative.

The initiative will showcase the orchestra's expanding presence in Mexico, the United States and Canada, where San Diego Symphony Music & Artistic Director Rafael Payare also heads the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal. He will conduct the Montréal orchestra on Oct. 29 at

Jacobs Music Center in downtown San Diego. It will be followed by a newly announced “The Sound of Two Cities” free concert on Oct. 30 at the nearby Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, where Payare will lead both orchestras separately and then together in a joint performance.

Admission is free to the Oct. 30 concert, but attendees are encouraged to RSVP online at: sandiegosymphony.formstack.com/forms/free_concert_2026. Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos, who will join the orchestra for all but one of its European tour dates, will be the featured soloist at the Oct. 29 concert here.

Those two late-October concerts will be preceded by the San Diego Symphony’s free Oct. 7 concert at the Tijuana Cultural Center, CECUT, as part of the center’s 44th anniversary celebration. Payare will also be at CECUT on Oct. 6 to discuss his career and to do a Q&A with area music students. The symphony performed a free concert on May 12 at CECUT. They also conducted June and August get-togethers with students in Tecate and Mexicali by Payare and members of the orchestra.

“I first played with the symphony at CECUT in 2023 as part of the California Festival,” Payare said, speaking from Montreal.

“I said then that this won’t be a one-time thing and that it should be part of a tradition we will have,” he continued. “It’s very important to the orchestra that we play there. Tijuana is 20 minutes away from San Diego and we are sharing art there with our friends. The beautiful thing is music has no borders. It’s an international language and a language in its own right.”

A native of Venezuela who became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2024, Payare learned music as a student in his homeland’s free El Sistema, which provides free music instruments and instruction to students in under-resourced communities.

His first international concert tours were as a French-horn player in Venezuela’s El Sistema-fueled Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra. Its 1995 U.S. tour with the then-15-year-old Payare included concerts at the United Nations in New York and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

By forging closer ties with music students and schools in Baja, Payare and the San Diego Symphony hope to inspire a younger generation of musicians to follow in their footsteps.

“Our growing relationships with these really gifted students is an opportunity for them to be inspired by Rafael, whose life was forever changed by music,” said Martha Gilmer, the symphony’s president and CEO.

“Having a bigger dialogue and building greater understanding is something we believe in strongly. Mexico and Canada are our neighbors and San Diego being a border city

underscores the importance of our relationship. Music is a connective tissue that strongly bonds us.”

That connection stretches both north and south.

Payare’s two upcoming San Diego performances with the Montreal orchestra are part of a three-city California tour that is being partly underwritten by The Royal Bank of Canada. It includes an Oct. 25 concert at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco and an Oct. 27 concert at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

If all goes as hoped, the San Diego Symphony will perform in Montreal — with Payare conducting — in 2028 or 2029.

“We are working on that,” Payare said. “We are touring in Europe next year. But in the same way I am doing a West Coast tour in October with the Montreal orchestra, we will do a tour with the San Diego Symphony that includes a concert in Montreal.”

In a step that should bring them even closer together, the two orchestras have co-commissioned a new work for next year. Entitled “Monarch,” it is being written by Jimmy Lopez, who is the composer-in-residence for both the San Diego and Montreal orchestras. Set to have its U.S. debut next June 4 at Jacobs Music Center, it is named after the monarch butterfly, whose annual migration path extends from Canada and the U.S. to central Mexico.

“A piece like this is absolutely more significant in these polarized times,” Payare said. “It’s a way to provide a little hope to people through music.”

Those sentiments are seconded by Alicia G. Kerber Palma, the Consul General of Mexico in San Diego.

“Culture is a fundamental tool for humanizing international relations because it allows societies to get to know each other directly and discover the common elements that they share,” said Palma, in a statement released Tuesday by the symphony.

“Music demonstrates, perhaps better than any speech, the possibility of building bridges. The San Diego Symphony’s performances in Tijuana and the musical exchanges from Tijuana to San Diego transform the stage into a binational space.”