

# Impresario of the Year: Martha Gilmer

By Gerard McBurney

*When Martha Gilmer took the reins of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra in 2014, she brought with her a three-plus-decade record of success with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Never one to rest on her laurels, she has transformed SDSO into a centerpiece of the city's cultural life.*



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In her 11 years as president and CEO of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra, Martha Gilmer has raised the ensemble and the institution to an unprecedented height. She spearheaded the building of Rady Shell, an inviting summer-performance venue sitting on San Diego Bay. She oversaw a state-of-the-art renovation of Copley Hall, the orchestra's longtime home. She hired Rafael Payare as music director; under his aegis, the orchestra has established itself in the top tier of California's musical ensembles. Along the way, Gilmer has erased much red ink from the orchestra's ledgers, turning SDSO into a model of financial as well as artistic good health.

Gilmer's connection to music stretches back to her girlhood, in the small town of Burlington, Wisconsin. "I started playing piano when I was four," she recounts. "We didn't have a big symphony orchestra in town, but we made music: it was part of what you did on a cold winter night. I played the organ in church; I played weddings; I played for a circus. I wasn't going to be a concert pianist, but music was a part of my life."

As a student at Northwestern, she took a summer internship with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, then in 1978 joined the organization as assistant to the artistic administrator, Peter Jonas. He became her mentor—and taskmaster. "He was tough; he was impossible; he was determined," Gilmer says. "It was the English-boardings-school method of arts administration. But all the values I hold today started in Chicago."

Six years later, when Jonas returned home to London, Gilmer was named vice-president for artistic planning and administration. She held the position for thirty years, overseeing a dazzling array of projects, including Claudio Abbado's concert *Wozzeck* (1984), and Barenboim's theatrical productions of the Mozart-Da Ponte comedies in 1992. The orchestra's collaborations with Pierre Boulez were near to her heart: she recalls with special fondness the 1987 performances of his *Répons*.

A key part of her CSO legacy is the wealth of educational community engagement programs that sprang from her leadership. The largest in scale was the 2005–10 "Beyond the Score" series, pairing performances of key works with in-depth analyses, resulting in 30 different programs.

When Gilmer took the helm of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra in 2014, she continued putting an emphasis on the surrounding community. Under the rubric "Music Connects," SDSO's community-engagement efforts include school programs, orchestral and chamber concerts, and the summer-intern "High School Ambassadors" program, fostering youth leadership and development. "Music Connects" involves partnerships with fully 91 local organizations, and it distributes over 12,000 tickets annually.

Gilmer's commitment to community engagement stems from her alienation, as a young person, from classical-music culture. "I understand when people say they don't know how to listen or how to experience the music," she explains. "When I first heard the

*Eroica*, in college, I fell asleep in the second movement. It was a way of shutting down—I felt like I needed a learner’s permit. It’s not enough just to have a pre-concert lecture; we have to allow people to get access and explore this great music.”

On joining SDSO, Gilmer immediately set about enticing a world-class conductor to serve as music director: a natural focus for a woman who had worked with Abbado, Barenboim, and Boulez, along with Solti, Bernstein, Carlos Kleiber, Haitink, and Muti. Her quest culminated in the 2019 hiring of Payare. Like Gustavo Dudamel, the Venezuelan conductor is a product of his country’s El Sistema music-education system. He has transformed the sound of the orchestra, sharpened its artistic mission, and made it a contender on a national and international scale.

For some years, the orchestra had given concerts on the water’s edge at the Port of San Diego. But the Rady Shell, constructed under Gilmer’s aegis, has kicked the ensemble’s outdoor presence up several notches. It opened at a providential time: the summer of 2021, when Covid restrictions were still in place. Gilmer moved the orchestra’s fall concerts to the new facility, allowing her to keep programming intact while staying within social-distancing guidelines. The Rady Shell now hosts roughly 30 orchestra concerts each year, along with a vigorous schedule of pop concerts featuring luminaries ranging from Sting to Boyz II Men. Meanwhile, the \$125 million renovation of the original 1929 interior of the Fox Theater has produced the visually splendid, acoustically stunning Jacobs Music Center, unveiled in 2024.

“I said when I came that I wanted the orchestra to be part of the fabric of the community,” Gilmer relates. “We aren’t there yet—the community is big, and there’s still a lot to do. But I’m very proud.” •

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