San Diego and Montreal orchestras ignited Friday at historic ‘The Sound of Two Cities’ concert

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George Varga November 1, 2026

Led by music director Rafael Payare, the performance included nine brass players who performed on a yacht in San Diego Bay



Rafael Payare, center, led members of the San Diego Symphony and the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal in a thrilling joint concert Friday at The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park. (Gary Payne / Courtesy San Diego Symphony)

The temperature in Montréal was 42 degrees when Friday night’s open-air concert by the San Diego Symphony and Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal began at 7:30 p.m. at The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park. The temperature in San Diego, where Rafael Payare conducted both orchestras, was 67.

The temperature on stage at The Shell? Sizzling.

Titled “The Sound of Two Cities,” the historic concert marked the first joint performance anywhere by the two orchestras, which share the same music and artistic director, Payare. What resulted was a thrilling evening of music that repeatedly soared as the two ensembles performed separately during the first half of the concert, then joined forces for the second.

For good measure, there was also a little electronically enhanced soaring.

During the final movement of the concert-concluding Pines of Rome (Pini Di Roma), a 1924 tone poem by Ottorino Respighi,, nine brass players performed from aboard Ocean Wings, a yacht owned by San Diego Symphony supporters Jan and Kevin Curtis that was floating in the water by the stage.

“I wanted to showcase the two orchestras in a special way,” Payare told The San Diego Union-Tribune in September. “Having musicians play from the boat will be a nice little surprise.”



For the finale of Friday night’s join concert by the San Diego and Montreal symphonies, nine brass players performed on a yacht immediately adjacent to the stage where members of both orchestras performed together. (Gary Payne / Courtesy San Diego Symphony)

It wasn’t the only unexpected moment at Friday’s free concert, which earned several standing ovations from the enthusiastic, multi-generational audience.

During the Respighi piece's third movement, "I pini del Gianicolo" ("The Pines of the Janiculum"), a recent recording of two nightingales and other birds from the Italian countryside was briefly featured. Music-loving ornithologists can point to the 1910 Deutsche Grammophoncq release, "Song of a Nightingale, No. 2" ("Il canto dell'Usignolo") as the first commercial recording to feature a bird.

With or without the sounds of any high-flying participants — real or simulated — or the use of any seafaring vessels, the concert handily lived up to its billing as: "Two Orchestras. Two Countries. One Stage. One Extraordinary Night."

Friday's performance followed the San Diego Symphony's early October concert in Tijuana and Thursday's often-dazzling Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal concert at Jacobs Music Center, the indoor home of the San Diego Symphony. All three performances are part of the San Diego orchestra's recently announced "Beyond Borders: North American Music Initiative."

After welcoming the audience at The Shell, San Diego Symphony President and CEO Martha Gilmer said: "Tonight is an important celebration of what we share in common, rather than what separates us."

Those sentiments were seconded by Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal CEO Mélanie La Couture, who spoke in both French and English. "We're here because we want to build bridges and share our passion for music," she said. "You will always be welcome in Montreal."

The San Diego Symphony will embark on its debut European tour in April. Payare and the orchestra will be joined for the tour by Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos.

Not coincidentally, Kavakos also joined Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal and Payare here Thursday for a jaw-droppingly brilliant performance of Tchaikovsky's Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 35.

It is the same bravura piece he soloed on during the Montréal orchestra's concerts last week in San Francisco and Los Angeles, two cities where the ensemble was appearing for the first time in 37 years. Kavakos performed the deviously intricate and demanding Tchaikovsky Concerto with deceptive ease and exceptional emotional depth, so much so that it is difficult to imagine anyone matching him.



Rafael Payare did double duty Friday at The Shell, where he conducted both the San Diego Symphony and Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal. (Gary Payne / Courtesy San Diego Symphony)

Thursday and Friday's performances marked the San Diego debut by Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, which celebrated its 90th anniversary two years ago. The San Diego Symphony is now in its 116th year — and its seventh under Payare. He began leading the Montréal orchestra in 2022 and recently signed a contract extension that runs through 2032. His San Diego contract was extended last year to run through 2029. Another extension is likely to follow.

At The Shell on Friday, Payare led both orchestras with a stunning command of power and finesse, achieving subtle shadings, dynamic precision and impassioned velocity with equal poise, skill and attention to detail. Approaching each orchestra as a multidimensional musical instrument of limitless scope, Payare took great care to demonstrate the range and potential of both the San Diego Symphony and Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal.

San Diego Symphony opened the concert with an exhilarating performance of Bartok's Suite from The Miraculous Mandarin, Op. 19, that qualified as a perfectly calibrated aural roller-coaster ride. The Montreal orchestra followed with a reading of Ravel's Suite No. 2 from Daphnis et Chloé that began with a rhapsodic flourish and built majestically throughout.

Rather than try to show each other up, the two orchestras dedicated themselves to making each piece shine and captivate. Under Payare's expert direction, they did exactly that.

Following intermission, a combined 131 musicians from both orchestras seamlessly performed Prokofiev's Scythian Suite, Op. 20, with bracing intensity and a keen ear for nuance. The Montreal orchestra's members served as the principal musicians for this piece, an equation that was reversed for the equally enthralling reading of Respighi's Pines of Rome, which featured 117 musicians on stage and the nine aboard Ocean Wings.

Watching each orchestra's concertmasters, San Diego's Jeff Thayer and Montreal's Andrew Wan, easily trade roles — as did all the principal players — provided a palpable demonstration of the empathetic interaction and artistic cooperation that were welcome hallmarks of Friday's concert.

Both orchestras released new albums this year, each with Payare at the helm. Initial plans are now underway for the San Diego Symphony to perform in Montreal, another literal manifestation of its "Beyond Borders" initiative. The next San Diego/Montreal collaboration may be a few years away, but it won't come a moment too soon.