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The San Diego Symphony's Splendid New Sound

The orchestra and its conductor, rising star Rafael Payare, have returned to the Jacobs Music Center, a former movie palace whose acoustic shortcomings were recently rectified in a renovation that allows the ensemble's artistry to shine.

By David Mermelstein

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The Jacobs Music Center PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG

San Diego

At a time when California's two leading orchestras are facing serious challenges, its third most prominent band, the nearly 114-year-old San Diego Symphony, is having a moment. The relatively little-known ensemble and Rafael Payare, its popular and photogenic music director, just reopened their substantially renovated primary venue, the downtown Jacobs Music Center, which after a four-and-a-half year closure has had its seating capacity reduced to just over 1,800 to accommodate sonic improvements.

Up the coast a bit, Gustavo Dudamel has begun his penultimate season as conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where anxiety about who succeeds the departing star verges on preoccupation. Farther north, this season marks the last of five for Esa-Pekka Salonen and the San Francisco Symphony, bringing an unexpected and disappointing end to what seemed, before the Covid-19 pandemic, a potential new golden age to follow Michael Tilson Thomas's quarter-century reign in the City by the Bay.

Yet here in mellow San Diego, matters musical seem positively sanguine. Mr. Payare—like Mr. Dudamel, a product of Venezuela's vaunted El Sistema music-education program—started his tenure with this orchestra in 2019. Now he is presiding over not just the unveiling of the symphony's successfully revamped hall (a repurposed Fox movie palace in the Spanish Baroque style, complete with organ, that lacked flattering acoustics) but also a general lifting in the quality of the playing since his arrival. Until recently, that has been most evident in performances at the Rady Shell, the ensemble's outdoor, waterfront home, which opened in 2021.

The conductor, who has hired 16 of the symphony's 82 contracted players, is sometimes regarded as a protégé of Mr. Dudamel, though, at age 44, he is slightly older than his compatriot and longtime friend. Mr. Payare was a Dudamel Fellow, the L.A. Philharmonic's maestros-of-tomorrow program, in 2012/13 (the same year as the much-lauded Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla) and a recurring presence at the Walt Disney Concert Hall and the Hollywood Bowl during Mr. Dudamel's early years in L.A. But only last season did Mr. Payare conduct one of the Philharmonic's regular subscription programs at Disney Hall for the first time.

Exuding a podium manner of extreme, yet unforced, exuberance, the lanky Mr. Payare puts a high premium on bringing joy to concert audiences. That was evident at the gala program he led on Sept. 28 to mark the hall's reopening, the alterations courtesy of the same firm, Akustiks, that transformed New York's Geffen Hall in 2022. For this occasion, a series of soloists, including the conductor's wife, the American cellist Alisa Weilerstein, joined the orchestra and Mr. Payare in various showpieces, the best of which was a subtly inflected and burnished account of Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini," with Inon Barnatan at the piano.



Inon Barnatan, Rafael Payare and members of the San Diego Symphony PHOTO: TODD ROSENBERG

But the acid test for the hall's new sound was Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony the following weekend, the main event on a program that also included Thomas Larcher's "Time," co-commissioned by the orchestra in 2022. (I heard the second and third of three concerts, Oct. 5 and 6.) A successful interpretation of any Mahler symphony must balance blended sound and piquant individual voices, but this one—with its vast instrumental forces, chorus and pair of vocal soloists—requires particularly careful weighting of its varied elements. Mr. Payare achieved this splendidly in both performances, impelling the roughly 85-minute work ever forward while savoring harmonic details.

Yet of the two—the first heard about halfway between the stage and the orchestra level's back wall; the second, close to the front of the first balcony—it was the latter that seduced me with sonic splendor. As a rule, old movie theaters, gorgeous though they may be—this one opened in 1929—do not make good concert halls, acoustically speaking. But trial and error have demonstrated that with care, and enough money for various abatements and enhancements, felicitous sound can be achieved in such spaces. That's certainly the case here, where the formerly execrable acoustics on the ground floor have been substantially improved. But for large orchestral works, like Mahler and Bruckner symphonies, concertgoers should always opt for seats well above the players, where the music unfurls like a windswept banner.

Mr. Payare returns to the podium from Dec. 6 through 8, and then again on Jan. 31 and into early February. His contract in San Diego runs through spring 2027, but I expect he'll remain with this orchestra beyond that. There appears to be plenty of enthusiasm all around, and his relationship with Martha Gilmer, the orchestra's president and CEO, seems especially tight. That said, his services are increasingly in demand. In 2022, concurrent with his position here, he became music director of the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Canada's most prestigious orchestra.

There is also work to be done beyond the artistic in this clement city. The remodeled auditorium, entombed in a generic office tower since 1989, lacks the outward visibility a concert hall ought to have. Better signage and a grander entrance are said to be under discussion. More concerning is the rampant homelessness and squalor that blights this part of the city. No arts organization can solve such problems, but the orchestra's return to the neighborhood should be used as a fulcrum for urban renewal—and the sooner the better if attracting new audiences to classical music is a goal.

—*Mr. Mermelstein is the Journal's classical music critic.*

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Videos

