



San Diego Symphony.

RAFAEL PAYARE | MUSIC & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

MEDIA ALERT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 1, 2025

San Diego Symphony Announces Inaugural Conducting Fellowship Cohort

Seven conductors represent an accomplished and diverse field of emerging leaders

San Diego, CA—The San Diego Symphony has announced the inaugural cohort of its **Conducting Fellowship Program**, an initiative conceived by Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare and designed to cultivate the next generation of orchestral leaders. The seven fellows for the 2025–26 season will receive mentorship from Payare and conduct performances at Jacobs Music Center, The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, and across the region through education and community engagement programs.

The program offers emerging conductors the opportunity to work closely with Payare, guest conductors, and the Symphony’s artistic, education, and community engagement teams. Combining podium experience with professional development, the fellowship helps participants strengthen their musical leadership, while expanding their professional networks. Fellows will also lead education, family, and community concerts that inspire and connect with audiences of all ages.

The seven conductors selected for the 2025–26 Conducting Fellowship represent a diverse and accomplished group of emerging leaders in the orchestral field. Each brings distinctive artistic vision, experience, and a deep commitment to connecting music with communities around the world. The inaugural fellows are Sunny Xuecong Xia, Tristan Rais-Sherman, Na’Zir McFadden, Enluis Montes Olivar, Gerald Karni, Nathan Aspinall, and Kalena Bovell.

“Mentorship is at the heart of what makes music flourish,” says Payare, whose idea to start this program was inspired in part by his own experiences working with such conductors as Lorin Maazel and Claudio Abbado. “With this new Conducting Fellowship, we’re giving gifted young conductors the opportunity to grow artistically, to collaborate with extraordinary musicians and administrators to experience how a wonderful institution runs,

and to find their own voice on the podium. It's deeply inspiring to welcome this next generation of leaders into our musical family."

Sunny Xuecong Xia

Recognized for her innate musicality and compelling presence, [Sunny Xuecong Xia](#) is Associate Conductor of the Seattle Symphony and Seattle Opera. Equally at home in opera and symphonic repertoire, her upcoming engagements include the Dallas Opera, Seattle Opera, San Diego Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, and Phoenix Symphony. She is mentored by Xian Zhang and Ludovic Morlot in Seattle, and Marin Alsop as part of the Taki Alsop Conducting Fellowship. Xia holds dual master's degrees in conducting and violin performance from the Cleveland Institute of Music and a doctorate from Arizona State University. Originally from Guangzhou, China, she is fluent in multiple languages and is also an accomplished violinist and athlete.

Tristan Rais-Sherman

[Tristan Rais-Sherman](#), a three-time recipient of The Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Award, recently completed his tenure as assistant conductor of The Philadelphia Orchestra, where he led performances at the Kimmel Center and Mann Center, helped launch the orchestra's award-winning Orchestra After 5 series, and conducted the ensemble in Beijing during its historic 2023 China tour. Recent highlights include debuts with the Baltimore Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Hohhot Philharmonic Orchestra, and Xiamen Philharmonic Orchestra. In the 2025–26 season, Rais-Sherman will debut with the Calgary Philharmonic, make his first appearance with the Harbin Symphony Orchestra, and return to both the San Diego Symphony and The Philadelphia Orchestra.

Na'Zir McFadden

American conductor [Na'Zir McFadden](#) is known for connecting audiences through dynamic, expressive performances that honor tradition while embracing fresh perspectives. Celebrated for his "great conducting technique and energetic podium presence" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*), McFadden has made debuts with the Dresdner Philharmonie and Boston, Baltimore, Nashville, and Utah symphonies. Formerly assistant conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and music director of its youth orchestra, he now serves as assistant conductor of the Jacksonville Symphony. A recent Tanglewood Conducting Fellow, McFadden has worked with mentors including Andris Nelsons, Alan Gilbert, and Gustavo Dudamel.

Enluis Montes Olivar

Venezuelan conductor [Enluis Montes Olivar](#), 28, is associate conductor of the Simón Bolívar Chamber Orchestra and winner of the 2024 Glenn Gould Protégé Prize. A former Dudamel Fellow with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, he has conducted at the Hollywood

Bowl and Davies Symphony Hall. Montes Olivar led the world's largest orchestra in a Guinness World Record-setting performance and has assisted Gustavo Dudamel at the Paris Opera. He studied at the Simón Bolívar Conservatory and teaches orchestra conducting at the Schwob Music Preparatory at Columbus State University. His dynamic leadership and international experience mark him as one of the rising stars of his generation.

Gerald Karni

Born in 1996, [Gerald Karni](#) is an internationally acclaimed conductor and violist who has led performances at the Elbphilharmonie; with Lucerne Symphony, Belgrade Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic Ensemble and will debut this season with the Nurnberger Symphoniker. A three-time Solti Foundation Career Assistance Award recipient, Karni studied conducting at the Conservatorio della Svizzera Italiana and viola at Zurich University of the Arts. He founded Zurich's Side-by-Side Project and is a longtime member of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra under Daniel Barenboim. Karni resides in Stockholm and continues to work with major orchestras across Europe and the United States.

Nathan Aspinall

Australian conductor [Nathan Aspinall](#) is resident conductor of the Nashville Symphony. He has led orchestras across the United States, Europe, and Australia, including the Minnesota Orchestra and Gewandhausorchester Leipzig. A Tanglewood Fellow and Aspen Conducting Prize recipient, Aspinall studied at New England Conservatory and the University of Queensland. Passionate about education and outreach, he has spearheaded initiatives to broaden access to orchestral music. His nuanced interpretations and collaborative approach have earned him respect from both musicians and audiences.

Kalena Bovell

Panamanian-American conductor [Kalena Bovell](#) is a trailblazer in classical music and the first Black woman to conduct an opera in Canada. Recipient of the 2024 Sphinx Medal of Excellence, Bovell previously served as assistant conductor of the Memphis Symphony. Bovell's 2025–2026 season includes debuts with the New World Symphony, Redlands Symphony, and Acadiana Symphony. Bovell has led performances with the Chineke! Orchestra, Louisiana Philharmonic, and Orchestre classique de Montréal. A poet and advocate for equity, she came to music at age 11, began formal music training at 18 and earned degrees from The Hartt School and Chapman University.

About the San Diego Symphony

The San Diego Symphony stands in the vanguard of California orchestras and among the nation's Tier 1 Orchestras. Under the leadership of President and CEO Martha Gilmer and Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare, the Symphony's 82 full-time musicians—graduates of the world's most celebrated schools of music—perform for more than 250,000 people each season. Over the course of a century, the Symphony has grown into one of the region's most influential cultural institutions, earning national recognition for its artistry, innovation, and community impact. From the stunning waterfront venue of The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park to the revitalized Jacobs Music Center, the Symphony offers a dynamic range of experiences: Masterworks, Jazz, film-with-orchestra, Broadway and family concerts, and free Music Connects performances that bring music to neighborhoods across San Diego. As the musical heart of the city, the Symphony shapes and reflects the region's cultural vitality. Through its Learning and Community Engagement programs, the Symphony reaches more than 65,000 people annually, fostering connection through the shared power of music. www.sandiegosymphony.org

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