SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ROLLS OUT ANOTHER Jacobs Masterworks season that begins Oct. 9 and runs through May 29, 2016. It is much more than a usual year. The season marks Music Director Jahja Ling’s 12th and next to last with the orchestra. He conducts 23 works (nearly a third of them performed by San Diego Symphony for the first time) in seven of 18 programs. The season also features a festival within a season (Upright & Grand, Jan. 8-Feb. 8), collaboration with John Malashock Dance and nine guest conductors—one of whom could become Ling’s successor.

The season also marks the first anniversary of the arrival of Chief Executive Officer Martha Gilmer. A real sparkplug, her presence is already vibrantly manifested at Jacobs Music Center and throughout the city of San Diego. Having announced Jazz @ the Jacobs, she is bursting with ideas for the future, enthusiasm for San Diego and its orchestra, and praise for Maestro Ling.

“There’s so much energy surrounding this institution,” she says, remarking that going to work each day is not something she must do, but something she can’t wait to do. “They are an amazing group of musicians, both on and off the stage. They really like spending time together. You might think, ‘They make beautiful music together, of course, that goes without saying,’ but I can tell you that isn’t always the culture in an orchestra. It is here, and it’s just great. That can only make everything better.”

Gilmer, who was formerly vice president for artistic planning with Chicago Symphony Orchestra, believes that artistic excellence begins with having the right people. “I have great admiration for Jahja and what he has brought—the standard he has set for the orchestra and the caliber and quality of the musicians he and the orchestra audition committee have hired. He comes from the great tradition that understands the necessity to have one common sound. It’s like having many bows and many lungs,
but having a unified concept. That’s the hallmark of this orchestra.

In the next two years, we pay tribute to Jahja’s legacy, and we also look to the next step in the orchestra’s artistic development. Our nine guest conductors have a wide range of styles, disciplines and experience. I’m really excited over what we will hear. It’s an exciting time in the life of an orchestra, which is a responsive organism. It’s not about the guest’s biography, or with whom they studied. It’s not about their fundamental musical knowledge. Something else takes over, and that’s when magic happens.”

The search committee includes orchestra members, board members and people from the administrative team. They will conduct “top-secret, don’t-leave-the-room conversations” evaluating each experience. Also part of the equation: every orchestra member’s response as an ensemble.

This season’s nine guest conductors are as follows: Edo de Waart (Oct. 23-25), Johannes Debus (Nov. 14), Carlos Miguel Prieto (Nov. 20-22), Mingzhu Guzani-Tyler (Dec. 4-6), Karina Canellakis (Jan. 8, 10), Cristian Macelaru (Jan. 16-17 at Jacobs, Jan. 15 at Poway Center for the Performing Arts), Joshua Weilerstein (Feb. 26-28), David Danzmayr (March 18-20) and Rory Macdonald (April 1-3).

“To find the right music director is going to take as long as it takes,” Gilmer says. “If we find someone in the first year, we’re going to move on it. If we find someone in year two, that’s great. If it takes a third year, fine. Music is part of our souls. It’s how we sort out the world we live in. It’s part of our being as a civilized city. Ben Folds, who appears with the symphony Saturday, Feb. 6, travels internationally. He says he can tell what kind of a city it is by what kind of an orchestra it has.”

Gilmer’s goal is to place San Diego Symphony foremost in the awareness of San Diego, the nation and beyond.

As for handing off the baton to a new music director, no transformation just happens. Ling says his experience with San Diego Symphony has been a cumulative thing—beginning in 2003 when he became music director designate, charged with rebuilding a decimated orchestra as it emerged from bankruptcy.

“We’d lost a lot of players,” he says. “To date I have hired 65 musicians. About 45 to 50 of them are still playing with us. From the existing members and the new ones, we were able to create one of the finest ensembles in the country. I don’t take full credit because everybody worked together from the board and donors, to the staff and the musicians.”

Once a new player is chosen, Ling determines how he or she fits the ensemble and instills a spirit of artistic integrity. “That is the most important thing,” he says. “You can be a family, you can be exciting, you can do all the things that any great orchestra can do, but if you don’t have a unified and deep understanding of the composer’s intent, you may present a wonderful concert, but still not make a memorable concert. To make it memorable, the orchestra must have a unified concept that allows them to do something special, not just because I told them, but because it is something that comes from themselves. When an audience receives that, it stirs the soul. I think we’ve achieved that many times. It is something magical.

“We’ve had so many memorable moments together. I will always treasure those. I gave my all and my best to this orchestra. And I intend to do so until I leave at the end of the 2016-17 season and beyond, when I return as conductor laureate.”

Ling’s forthcoming season embraces newer repertoire, some contemporary composers and works by familiar composers but not often performed. He especially looks forward to conducting Berlioz’s Te Deum (Dec. 11-13) with cellist Alisa Weilerstein, violinist Jeff Thayer, the San Diego Master Chorale and the hall’s magnificent pipe organ. With great excitement, he ticks off works by Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Mahler, Carl Nielsen and Jean Sibelius. “I’m very proud of the well-balanced repertoire selected for our audience.”

Ling states that his mission has been to build a great orchestra, a fact confirmed by audiences and critics in New York and China. He had hoped to take SDSO to Europe, too, but time is growing so short, and he doesn’t hold out hope of that. Another unfulfilled dream is completing his Mahler cycle with the composer’s Symphony No. 8 Symphony of a Thousand, which requires a thousand-voice chorus, a huge pipe organ, an expanded orchestra and nine soloists. He imagines a surprise donor with a spare $300,000, then riffs on possible venues and says, "Everybody, pray."

Of his time with San Diego Symphony, Ling says, "I have no apology or regret. As humans we are not perfect, but we have done something once unimaginable here. The orchestra should be very proud of their achievement."

Upon the completion of his 13th season in May 2017, Ling and his family—which includes his wife, pianist Jessie Chang, and two young daughters—will remain in San Diego, from where he can fly to pursuits around the world. Already, he’s been asked by the Cleveland Orchestra to revive its Youth Orchestra educational program, and he plans to become even more involved in the Jakarta-based Stephen Tong Christian Evangelical Ministries. His dedication to the latter, started by his best friend, began 50 years ago. Prior to the beginning of the MastersWorks Series, he goes with Tong to Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Dallas and San Francisco. Evidently, Ling will not slow down.

Copely Symphony Hall is located at 750 B St, downtown San Diego. For a complete list of the programs, guest artists and guest conductors, visit sandiesosymphony.org.