Martha Gilmer doesn’t play a lot of classical music around her house. “It’s because I don’t want to be a passive listener,” said Gilmer, the CEO of the San Diego Symphony. “One of the things people think about classical music is turning on the radio (or putting on a CD) and having it in the background while they iron, or do homework, or whatever. They think about it in a very passive way. They think of it as soothing.”

“The fact is, Beethoven never intended his Fifth Symphony to be soothing. There was nothing soothing about it. He was tortured, as we know.” You need to be an “active listener” to get Beethoven. Gilmer isn’t likely to confront symphony audiences seeking escape in classical music, but she is looking to engage them when the orchestra opens its Masterworks season Friday at Jacobs Music Center. She spent three decades with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra learning the art of programming with conductors Georg Solti, Claudio Abbado, Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim and Riccardo Muti before taking over the San Diego Symphony last year. She relies on director of artistic planning Tommy Phillips, music director Jahja Ling and the various guest conductors and music director candidates who will perform with the orchestra to put together the programs, but her fingerprints are all over an invigorating 2015-16 season. Here are a few of the programs emblematic of her philosophy.

San Diego Symphony Masterworks. Series opening concerts

When: Friday and next Sunday (Oct. 12); gala performance Saturday. Where: Jacobs Music Center, 750 B St., downtown. Phone: (619) 235-0804. Online: sandiegosymphony.com
SYMPHONY • Nov. 14 program a collaboration with S.D. Museum of Art

FROM E1
Oct. 9-11: "Opening Weekend: With Jihlai Ling and Yuja Wang"

One of Gilmer's fundamental tenets is to include something new, or even surprising, on every program, even if it's something sublime. The season-opening program of Strauss's Overture to "Die Fledermaus" Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 9 and Prokofiev's Suite from "Romeo and Juliet" appears relatively conventional, but it has a twist: Piano soloist Yuja Wang is a tiger at the keyboard, whose natural habitat is the big, bold piano concerto by composers like Rachmaninoff or Liszt. In San Diego, she's playing Mozart.

"She's a phenomenal powerhouse, and it isn't very often you hear her do Mozart," Gilmer said. "I'm very curious." (For the Oct. 10 gala program, Wang will perform Tchaikovsky, but his Second Piano Concerto rather than the well-worn first.)

Oct. 23-24: "Beethoven and Jan Adams"

While the orchestra has performed several of Adams' shorter pieces (and it played in the San Diego Opera's "Nixon in China" earlier this year), "Harmonielehre" is a symphonic-length tour-de-force that forms the bedrock of Adams' output. It's balanced on the program's second half by the most beloved violin concerto of all time, performed by James Ehnes. Gilmer points out that guest conductor Edo de Waart conducted the premiere of "Harmonielehre" with the San Francisco Symphony, so it's his "piece." But most of all, she likes the juxtaposition.

"When you have Jihlai's music in your ear, when you take the intermission and you come back to Beethoven, it allows you to listen to Beethoven in a different way," she said. "You can program Beethoven with a lot of different things, but the point is, I just love the contrast in this case."

Nov. 8-8: "Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique"

Indeed, the program includes Ling conducting Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 (a "Pathétique") and Sarah Chang will perform Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 1, but the surprise here is the opening work, a new piece from Judd Greenstein, "Change," an essay on the North Carolina Symphonia."

"I'm delighted we can have a commissioned work as part of the season," Gilmer said. "We will have more. Probably by 2017-18 we'll get into a kind of regular commissioning routine. I'd love to see us commission two to three works a year, and I'd love to get commissions for children's concerts as well."

Nov. 14: "The Art of Music"

The San Diego Museum of Art persuaded the orchestra to offer a program in collaboration with its exhibit "The Art of Music," which will include pieces by Rachmaninoff, Schoenberg, Berg and Debussy conducted by Johannes Debus. It's one of several single concerts that have allowed Gilmer to increase the number of Masterwork programs performed by the orchestra from 14 to 18. She expects that the greater variety of programs will attract more ticket buyers, but she's also looking at the further development of the orchestra. The more classical concerts they play, the more seamless the ensemble.

"The orchestra is really a laboratory," she said. "And if you do it right, performing in a professional setting should be a continuation of your education; you should be learning as a musician all the time."

"Programming" is not just to please the public, it's really to stimulate the whole creative process. I think we've just gotten hooked into classical music as elevator music or background music."

Gilmer does admit to recently playing classical music as background music at home. She even surprised her husband, William Gilmer, by putting on Mahler's final symphony, the Symphonies No. 9 (with Abbado conducting the Berlin Philharmonic), while they were packing up their house in Chicago. They just bought a house in the Kensington neighborhood of San Diego.

"He said, "Wow, you picked some really upbeat stuff!" But I said, no, it's monumental. It's an important piece; it marks the occasion. It's something coming to an end, coming to closure. We all transition and it was fantastic."

"But I'm sure that I do that."