



Rafael Payare

Conductor

With his innate musicianship, charismatic energy, gift for communication, and irresistibly joyous spirit, conductor Rafael Payare has “considerable grace and considerable swagger, making the two go unusually yet inexorably together” (*Los Angeles Times*). The 2025-26 season marks his fourth as Music Director of Canada’s Orchestre symphonique de Montréal (Montreal Symphony Orchestra/OSM) and his seventh as Music Director of California’s San Diego Symphony (SDS). Other current positions are Principal Conductor of Virginia’s Castleton Festival, a post he has held since 2015, and Conductor Laureate of Northern Ireland’s Ulster Orchestra, where he was Principal Conductor and Music Director from 2014 to 2019, making multiple appearances at London’s BBC Proms.

In the 2025–26 season, Payare and the SDS continue their ongoing performances of the complete cycle of symphonies by Shostakovich and Mahler, performing Shostakovich’s Eighth Symphony and Mahler’s Seventh. Other highlights include Bruckner’s Fourth Symphony; Sibelius’s Violin Concerto with soloist Augustin Hadelich; Beethoven’s First Symphony; Mendelssohn’s Third Symphony; a two-week Brahms festival in the spring encompassing the *German Requiem*, all four symphonies, and the Violin Concerto performed by Leonidas Kavakos; and Gabriela Ortiz’s new ecology-themed cello concerto, *Dzonot*, featuring dedicatee Alisa Weilerstein. The conductor begins his OSM season with an October Berlioz release and live performances of Berlioz’s *Damnation of Faust*, with other season highlights including Mahler’s Fourth and Ninth Symphonies; Beethoven’s Piano Concerto featuring Emanuel Ax; Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*; Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto performed by Bruce Liu; Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*; and much more. Payare makes his debut with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in 2025–26 and appears as a guest conductor with the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, London’s Philharmonia, and the NHK Symphony.

The 2024–25 season saw Payare and the SDS inaugurate San Diego’s newly renovated Jacobs Music Center, where they performed a season-opening account of Schoenberg’s monumental *Gurre-Lieder* to mark the composer’s 150th anniversary. This milestone was also recognized by the release of an all-Schoenberg album that marked their third together on the Pentatone label, adding to a rapidly growing and critically acclaimed discography. Previous releases include Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben* and Mahler’s *Rückert-Lieder* in 2024 and Mahler’s Fifth Symphony in 2023, which was named an Editor’s Choice by both *Gramophone* and *BBC Music Magazine*.

Since winning first prize at Denmark’s Malko Competition for Young Conductors in 2012, Payare has made debuts and forged longstanding relationships with many of the world’s preeminent orchestras. His U.S. collaborations include engagements with the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Houston Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Minnesota Orchestra, while his notable European appearances include dates with the Bavarian Radio Symphony, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Munich Philharmonic, NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra, Orchestra dell’Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich, and Vienna Philharmonic, which he has led at the Vienna Konzerthaus and Musikverein, on a Baltic tour, and at Paris’s

Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Payare has undertaken concerto collaborations with soloists including Piotr Anderszewski, Yefim Bronfman, Elīna Garanča, Sergey Khachatryan, Gil Shaham, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, Frank Peter Zimmermann, and Nikolaj Znaider. Also a dedicated opera conductor, he debuted at both London's Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and the Glyndebourne Festival with *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and has led *Madama Butterfly* and *La bohème* at Stockholm's Royal Swedish Opera, *Tosca* at the Royal Danish Opera, Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* at the Castleton Festival, and a new production of *La traviata* in Malmö, Sweden.

Born in Barcelona, Venezuela, in 1980, Payare first discovered classical music at the age of 14, when he began playing horn in the El Sistema program. After just three weeks he joined the Symphony Orchestra of Anzoátegui, before becoming part of the National Children's Orchestra of Venezuela, with which he toured Europe, Asia and the Americas. From 2001 to 2012 he served as Principal Horn of the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, taking part in prestigious tours and recordings with Gustavo Dudamel and other eminent conductors including Claudio Abbado, Lorin Maazel, Sir Simon Rattle, and Giuseppe Sinopoli, who first inspired Payare to conduct himself. Receiving conducting training from El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu and from subsequent mentors Maazel and Krzysztof Penderecki, Payare went on to lead all of Venezuela's major orchestras. Today he is himself an inspiration to younger musicians, continuing his long-standing involvement with El Sistema and the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra and enjoying a close relationship with London's Royal College of Music, where he conducts the symphony orchestra each season. He has also led youth projects with the Chicago Civic Orchestra, Orchestra of the Americas, and Filarmónica Joven de Colombia, and conducted a tour with the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland. Payare resides in San Diego and Montreal with his wife, acclaimed cellist Alisa Weilerstein, and their two young children.

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