



Contact:
Public Relations
San Francisco Symphony
415.503.5474
publicrelations@sfsymphony.org
www.sfsymphony.org/press

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE / OCTOBER 14, 2026



**THE SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY YOUTH ORCHESTRA AND WATTIS
FOUNDATION MUSIC DIRECTOR RADU PAPONIU PERFORM FIVE
CONCERTS IN THE 2026–27 SEASON**

**November 22 season-opening concert includes works by Michael Tilson Thomas,
Kodály, and Brahms**

**2026–27 SFSYO season also features the ensemble’s annual *Peter and the Wolf*
performance (December 13); a program of works by Beethoven, Mascagni, and Sibelius,
as well as Keiko Abe’s *Prism Rhapsody* for Marimba and Orchestra, featuring Aeneas
Yu, winner of the SFSYO’s 2025–26 Concerto Competition (February 28), and a concert
with pieces by Prokofiev, Ravel, and Gabriella Smith (May 23)**

**In December, SF Symphony and UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital San Francisco
partner for the third time to welcome recently discharged pediatric patients and their
families to a free holiday open rehearsal with the San Francisco Symphony Youth
Orchestra**

**SFSYO hosts the Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival on March 21, featuring four local
youth ensembles**

SAN FRANCISCO, CA—The San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra (SFSYO) and Wattis Foundation Music Director Radu Paponiu perform five concerts during the 2026–27 season, beginning with their season-opening performance on Sunday, November 22, in Davies Symphony Hall. Comprised of more than 100 musicians ranging in age from 12 to 21 and representing communities from throughout the Bay Area, the SFSYO is recognized internationally as one of the finest youth orchestras in the world. The Youth Orchestra provides a tuition-free orchestral experience of preprofessional caliber to talented young Bay Area musicians, with weekly rehearsals led by Paponiu. SFSYO members benefit from weekly coachings with San Francisco Symphony musicians and have the opportunity to work with world-renowned artists and conductors performing with the San Francisco Symphony.

"I cannot wait for a new season with the ever-talented young musicians of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra. We open by celebrating the extraordinary legacy of Michael Tilson Thomas with a performance of his *Agnegram*, alongside works inspired by central European folk traditions. As part of our holiday cycle, we are delighted to partner once again with UCSF Benioff for an open rehearsal of *Peter and the Wolf*. Later in the season, Concerto Competition winner Aeneas Yu performs Keiko Abe's innovative *Prism Rhapsody* for marimba and orchestra. We conclude with a program celebrating orchestral color through the distinctive voices of Gabriella Smith, Maurice Ravel, and Sergei Prokofiev. We look forward to exploring this wonderful music together and sharing it with all of you," said Paponiu.

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra performances

On **November 22**, Paponiu and the SFSYO honor late San Francisco Symphony Music Director Laureate Michael Tilson Thomas with a performance of Tilson Thomas's *Agnegram*, written in honor of Agnes Albert, a longtime SF Symphony supporter who assisted in founding the SFSYO. The program also includes Zoltán Kodály's vibrant *Dances of Galánta* and Johannes Brahms's monumental Symphony No. 4, the composer's final symphony.

On **December 13**, Mychal Threets joins the SFSYO to narrate its annual performance of Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. A Bay Area librarian, Threets is also the Resident Librarian for PBS and PBS Kids, as well as the host of *Reading Rainbow*. The concert includes selections from Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* Suite and additional programming to be announced. After *Peter and the Wolf*, Paponiu and the Youth Orchestra invite the audience to join them in a festive sing-along of popular holiday carols. The Youth Orchestra's performance of *Peter and the Wolf* is an annual holiday favorite and has been a regular part of the Orchestra's season since 1985. Past narrators have included Richard Dreyfuss, Tom Kenny, John Lithgow, Bobby McFerrin, Rita Moreno, Kathy Najimy, Linda Ronstadt, Sharon Stone, W. Kamau Bell, Joshua Dela Cruz, SF Symphony Music Director Laureate Michael Tilson Thomas, Leonard Nimoy, and Robin Williams, among many other lauded actors, comedians, musicians, and public figures.

The **February 28** concert features percussionist and 2025–26 SFSYO Concerto Competition winner Aeneas Yu performing Keiko Abe's virtuosic *Prism Rhapsody* for Marimba and Orchestra. The annual Concerto Competition provides an opportunity for an exceptional SFSYO student musician to take center stage as a soloist in a Youth Orchestra concert the following season. Paponiu and the Youth Orchestra open the concert with Ludwig van Beethoven's *Coriolan* Overture, a portrayal of a Roman general's vengeful attack on his homeland inspired by a play by Heinrich Joseph von Collin. The program also includes Pietro Mascagni's dramatic Intermezzo

from the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and Jean Sibelius's Symphony No. 2, imbued with Finnish national pride.

On **May 23**, Paponiu conducts Gabriella Smith's *Tidalwave Kitchen*, which the composer wrote while homesick for the Northern California coast. As part of Smith's creative partnership with the SF Symphony in 2026–27, she will work with Paponiu and the SFSYO during rehearsals of *Tidalwave Kitchen*. The SFSYO also performs Maurice Ravel's *Ma Mère l'Oye* (*Mother Goose*), inspired by Charles Perrault's children's stories from the 17th and 18th centuries. The program closes with Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5, composed at the height of the Second World War.

UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital San Francisco Open Rehearsal

On **December 13**, the San Francisco Symphony and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital San Francisco partner for the third time to welcome recently discharged pediatric patients and their families to a free holiday open rehearsal with the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra. The open rehearsal will feature the SFSYO, led by Radu Paponiu, in Sergei Prokofiev's timeless musical fable *Peter and the Wolf*. Bay Area librarian and *Reading Rainbow* host Mychal Threats joins the SFSYO as a special guest narrator. The open rehearsal performance also includes a festive audience sing-along featuring popular holiday carols.

The private rehearsal offers UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital San Francisco patients and their families a safe, welcoming space to gather and enjoy festive holiday memories this December. Inside the concert hall, families will be accommodated according to their children's unique needs, with designated areas for immunocompromised attendees to enjoy the performance at a comfortable distance from other guests. Spanish-language interpreters will also be available.

Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival

On **March 21**, the SFSYO hosts the 11th **Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival** (BAYOF) at Davies Symphony Hall. Conceived in 2009, the festival showcases some of the Bay Area's most talented youth orchestral ensembles, including the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra, Golden State Youth Orchestra, Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra, Oakland Symphony Youth Orchestra, and Peninsula Youth Orchestra. Each orchestra takes turns performing onstage, and the concert concludes with a performance of the finale from Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 by the Festival Orchestra, comprised of selected musicians from all five ensembles. Additional programming will be announced at a later date. Radu Paponiu serves as Festival Director for the program. Proceeds from the Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival are donated to charitable organizations that support homeless and underserved youth in each orchestra's local community.

Radu Paponiu, Wattis Foundation Music Director

Radu Paponiu joined the San Francisco Symphony as Wattis Foundation Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra (SFSYO) in the 2024–25 season. Prior to joining the SFSYO, he completed a five-year tenure as associate conductor of the Naples Philharmonic and a seven-year tenure as music director of the Naples Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. Additionally, he has served as music director of the Southwest Florida Symphony Orchestra and as assistant conductor of the Naples Philharmonic. As a guest conductor, Paponiu has appeared with the Romanian National Radio Symphony, Teatro Comunale di Bologna Orchestra, Rhode Island Philharmonic, Transylvania State Philharmonic Orchestra, Banatul Philharmonic, Louisiana Philharmonic, Rockford Symphony, Colorado Music Festival Orchestra, North Carolina

Symphony, California Young Artists Symphony, and National Repertory Orchestra. He has collaborated with notable soloists such as Evgeny Kissin, Yefim Bronfman, Emanuel Ax, Gil Shaham, Midori, Vladimir Feltsman, Robert Levin, Rachel Barton Pine, Charles Yang, Nancy Zhou, Stella Chen, and the Ébène Quartet. Paponiu has served as cover conductor with the San Francisco Symphony, Dallas Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, and Konzerthausorchester Berlin, and he has assisted conductors including Iván Fischer, Fabio Luisi, Manfred Honeck, Jaap van Zweden, Stéphane Denève, Hans Graf, Donald Runnicles, Cristian Măcelaru, Andrey Boreyko, Bernard Labadie, and Ludovic Morlot. Paponiu has served on the conducting faculty of the Juilliard Pre-College, as well as conductor for the Summer Performing Arts with Juilliard in Shanghai, China, and the Southeast Asia Music Festival in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Paponiu completed his Master of Music degree in orchestral conducting at the New England Conservatory of Music, where he studied with Hugh Wolff. While in Boston, he was also conductor apprentice with the Handel and Haydn Society. In the summer of 2017, Paponiu was appointed assistant conductor of the National Repertory Orchestra in Colorado, as well as conducting fellow for the Cabrillo Festival Workshop in California. He participated in the American Academy of Conducting at the Aspen Music Festival and School as the recipient of both the Albert Tipton Aspen Fellowship and the David A. Karetsky Memorial Fellowship. In Aspen, Paponiu furthered his studies under the guidance of Robert Spano, Larry Rachleff, Leonard Slatkin, Patrick Summers, and Federico Cortese.

Born in Romania, Paponiu began his musical studies on the violin at age seven, studying privately with Carmen Runceanu and Ștefan Gheorghiu. After coming to the United States at the invitation of the Perlman Music Program, he completed two degrees in violin performance under the guidance of Robert Lipsett at the Colburn Conservatory in Los Angeles. As a soloist and chamber musician, he has appeared in festivals throughout Europe and North America, collaborating with artists such as Itzhak Perlman, Clive Greensmith, Martin Beaver, Merry Peckham, and Vivian Hornik Weilerstein.

Paponiu currently resides in Redwood City with his wife, Blair Francis Paponiu, SF Symphony Associate Principal Flute, and their son, Noah. In his spare time, he enjoys chamber music reading parties, fishing, biking, and playing tennis.

Aeneas Yu, winner of the 2025–26 SFSYO Concerto Competition

Aeneas Yu is a 16-year-old percussionist and pianist from Northern California. He began his musical journey at the age of two with percussion and later expanded his studies to piano. Today, he studies percussion with Jacob Nissly, SF Symphony Principal Percussion, and focuses on marimba with Keiko Abe and Theodor Milkov, whose guidance has continued to shape his development as both a percussionist and musician.

Throughout his musical journey, Yu has participated in numerous national and international competitions. His accomplishments include first prize in the marimba solo category at the 2024 Golden Classical Music Awards International Competition, as well as back-to-back first place finishes in the High School Keyboard Solo category at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC). His competition experiences have also taken him to Carnegie Hall, where he performed five times between 2019 and 2023. Alongside his solo work, Yu performs with ensembles in the Valley Christian School Conservatory, where he continues to gain experience across a wide range of percussion instruments and musical settings.

Yu has sought opportunities to learn and perform beyond his regular studies. He has attended the Northwestern University Percussion Camp, the Hong Kong Baptist University Percussion Camp, and the Keiko Abe International Marimba Academy, allowing him to work with percussionists and musicians from different backgrounds while further developing his approach to performance. These experiences have played an important role in expanding his perspective on percussion and introducing him to new ideas, techniques, and approaches to music making.

Sharing music with others has also become an important part of Yu's musical life. He teaches the percussion ensemble at Friends of Children with Special Needs (FCSN), where he works with students with special needs through percussion and ensemble music. Teaching has given him the opportunity to use his own musical experience in a different way while helping others experience the enjoyment of making music together.

Outside of music, Yu enjoys playing badminton and basketball and spending time with his pet cat, Qioqio. Whether performing, competing, studying, or teaching, he continues to challenge himself as a young musician while sharing his love of percussion with the people around him.

About the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

The San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra (SFSYO) has earned a reputation as one of the finest youth ensembles in the world. Founded in 1981 to provide preprofessional training to the Bay Area's most gifted young musicians at no cost, the orchestra has toured Europe and Asia to rave reviews, winning the prestigious City of Vienna Prize at the International Youth and Music Festival in 1986 and performing to packed houses in the great halls of Europe. The SFSYO has performed for Queen Elizabeth II of England and has been featured on BBC radio. In the summer of 1996, the Youth Orchestra opened the San Francisco Symphony's groundbreaking American Mavericks Festival, performing John Cage's music with members of the Grateful Dead under Michael Tilson Thomas's baton.

The SFSYO was established during the summer of 1981, when 85 musicians aged 11 to 20 and representing communities from Napa to Santa Cruz were selected after 12 days of competitive auditions. The ensemble played its inaugural concert in January 1982, led by founding Music Director Jahja Ling. Over the years, Ling was succeeded as music director by David Milnes, Leif Bjaland, Alasdair Neale, Edwin Outwater, Benjamin Shwartz, Donato Cabrera, Christian Reif, and Daniel Stewart. In 2024, Radu Paponiu was appointed as the San Francisco Symphony's Wattis Foundation Youth Orchestra Music Director. Today, more than 100 musicians, chosen from more than 200 applicants per season, perform with the Youth Orchestra.

As part of the orchestra's innovative, tuition-free training program, musicians from the San Francisco Symphony coach the young musicians every week before the full ensemble rehearses with the Music Director. Youth Orchestra members also gain invaluable experience working with world-renowned artists, which have included Esa-Pekka Salonen, Michael Tilson Thomas, Herbert Blomstedt, Kurt Masur, John Adams, Yo-Yo Ma, Isaac Stern, Yehudi Menuhin, Wynton Marsalis, Midori, Joshua Bell, Mstislav Rostropovich, Sir Simon Rattle, Gustavo Dudamel, Ray Chen, and many others. Of equal importance, the young musicians are able to speak with these established artists about their professional and personal experiences and about music.

CALENDAR EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE:

Tickets:

Tickets for concerts at Davies Symphony Hall can be purchased via sfsymphony.org or by calling the San Francisco Symphony Box Office at 415.864.6000. Tickets for children and young adults under 18 are 50% off for the SFSYO's *Peter and the Wolf* performance on December 13 and the Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival on March 21.

Location:

Davies Symphony Hall is located at 201 Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco.

YOUTH ORCHESTRA

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra: Brahms 4

Sunday, November 22, 2026, at 6:00pm

Radu Paponiu conductor

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS *Agnegram*

ZOLTÁN KODÁLY *Dances of Galánta*

JOHANNES BRAHMS Symphony No. 4

Tickets: \$40–75

Ticket link: sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2026-27/Youth-Orchestra-Nov

HOLIDAY

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra: *Peter and the Wolf*

Sunday, December 13, 2026, at 2:00pm

Radu Paponiu conductor

Mychal Threets narrator

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY Selections from *The Nutcracker Suite*

SERGEI PROKOFIEV *Peter and the Wolf*

TRADITIONAL Carol Sing-along

Additional programming to be announced

Tickets: \$19.50–159 (tickets for children and young adults under 18 are 50% off)

Ticket link: sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2026-27/Peter-and-the-Wolf

YOUTH ORCHESTRA

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra: Sibelius 2

Sunday, February 28, 2027, at 2:00pm

Radu Paponiu conductor

Aeneas Yu marimba

Winner, 2025–26 SF Symphony Youth Orchestra Concerto Competition

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN *Coriolan* Overture

PIETRO MASCAGNI Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*

KEIKO ABE *Prism Rhapsody* for Marimba and Orchestra

JEAN SIBELIUS Symphony No. 2

Tickets: \$40–75

Ticket link: sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2026-27/Youth-Orchestra-Feb

YOUTH ORCHESTRA

Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival

Sunday, March 21, 2027, at 3:00pm

Radu Paponiu festival director

Golden State Youth Orchestra

Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra

Oakland Symphony Youth Orchestra

Peninsula Youth Orchestra

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY Finale from Symphony No. 5

Additional programming to be announced

YOUTH ORCHESTRA

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra: Gabriella Smith and Prokofiev 5

Sunday, May 23, 2027, at 2:00pm

Radu Paponiu conductor

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

GABRIELLA SMITH *Tidalwave Kitchen*

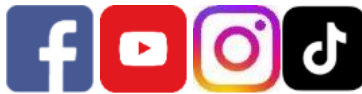
MAURICE RAVEL *Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)*

SERGEI PROKOFIEV *Symphony No. 5*

Tickets: \$40–75

Ticket link: sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2026-27/Youth-Orchestra-May

Connect with the San Francisco Symphony on [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#), and [TikTok](#):



The San Francisco Symphony receives support from 10,000 individual donors and 140 partner institutions.

San Francisco Arts Commission is Lead Municipal Partner of the San Francisco Symphony.

Grants for the Arts is a Season Partner of the San Francisco Symphony.

The Youth Orchestra concerts are generously supported by the Phyllis C. Wattis Youth Symphony Fund.

The San Francisco Symphony's Official Radio Partner is Classical California.

- San Francisco Symphony -