



San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra Biography

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 pre-professional 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 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' baton.

The SFSYO was established during the summer of 1981, when eighty-five 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 Schwartz, 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, over 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.

The San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra is a vital part of the Bay Area's rich cultural life. The Youth Orchestra has opened the Stern Grove Festival three times, performed for patients at Laguna Honda Hospital, played a benefit for Stanford Children's Hospital, given an Earthquake Relief Concert for the Hollister School of the Arts, and performed at the opening of San Francisco's Main Library. In addition to critically acclaimed appearances at home, the Youth Orchestra has toured Europe and Asia, giving sold out concerts in such legendary halls as Berlin's Philharmonie, Vienna's Musikverein, Saint Petersburg's Mariinsky Theater, Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, and Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie. The SFSYO's 2012 performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 1 at the Berlin Philharmonie was recorded and released on SFS Media. Other SFSYO releases include Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5, recorded live at Davies Symphony Hall in 1994, and Sergei Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2 recorded live at Prague's Dvořák Hall in 1998.

In the 2025–26 season, the SFSYO will perform four concerts on November 23, December 14, March 8, and May 17. In November, Aaron Ma, winner of the 2025 SF Symphony Youth Orchestra Concerto Competition, takes center stage to perform Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto with Radu Paponiu and

the SFSYO. The annual SFSYO Concerto Competition provides an opportunity for an exceptional SFSYO student musician to take center stage as a soloist in an SFSYO concert of the following year's season.