



Critical Acclaim

San Francisco Symphony, 2023–24

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Salonen and SF Symphony Summit Richard Strauss's Biggest Tone Poem](#) (October 2, 2023)

"In a positively brilliant performance, Salonen and the orchestra could have swept up even the most resistant skeptic... The ensemble came through with full-on conviction. The horns offered glowing hymns of praise and determined hunting calls. The woodwinds chirped and cooed, pranced and pondered. The strings glided through the world's wonderstruck raptures and ominous perils. The percussionists darted from double timpani to cowbells to organ keyboard to add pointed details."

San Francisco Chronicle: [Review: S.F. Symphony's guest conductor leads a brisk, athletic triumph](#) (January 12, 2024)

"This would be the moment to celebrate the arrival of the Symphony's newest member, the South Korean flutist Yubeen Kim, who lost no time filling listeners' hearts with visions of the splendors to come. Kim's tone is almost unimaginably rich — robust at its heart, full of shimmery colors in the periphery — and he deploys it with arresting eloquence. His little duet with principal oboist Eugene Izotov in the second movement of the Beethoven was a starburst moment.

"Kim had several occasions to step to the fore during the Shostakovich as well, including a delicate passage in the symphony's third movement which he shared with his fellow rookie, principal harpist Katherine Siochi. The two of them sounded wonderfully simpatico."

Musical America: [MTT's Mahler Five is a Grand Finale](#) (January 30, 2024)

"The symphony's solo trumpet call, voiced by associate principal Aaron Schuman as an urgent and somehow pensive warning, hung suspended for an extra beat, before the concussive release of the snarling, thunderous orchestral chords... All the brasses delivered a gleaming litany of anguish and menace, frenzy and joy. They were, collectively, the heroes of the night."

Seen and Heard International: [Esa-Pekka Salonen's distinctive Sibelius in the first SFS concert after announcing his 2025 departure](#) (March 17, 2024)

"Principal clarinet Carey Bell, deftly supported by timpanist Edward Stephan, got things off to an intoxicating start. The strings and other woodwinds joined in, and the performance took on an air of discovery as each paragraph of music rose and fell... The *Scherzo*, though never playful, lightened the mood and led to a finale that featured glistening brass chorales, dramatic dance music, string music that propelled the rhythms with gusto and ended with a burst."

San Francisco Chronicle: [Review: S.F. Symphony unleashes Prokofiev's demons in a hair-raising program](#) (April 26, 2024)

"Principal violist Jonathan Vinocour, long one of the Symphony's comparatively unheralded treasures, got an opportunity to step into the spotlight for a superb rendition of William Walton's 1929 Viola Concerto... Vinocour adopted a thoughtful, deliberate approach to the music, bringing an almost philosophical intensity to the first movement and (with a tender assist from principal bassoonist Stephen Paulson) bridging the gap in the finale between expressivity and wit."

Seen and Heard International: [Salonen's majestic Bruckner Symphony No.4 brings high notes to turbulent times in San Francisco](#) (June 25, 2024)

"The musicians seemed primed to react to every flick of the baton. It was a revelatory reading, a glorious, majestic combination of precision and a sort of organic swelling and swerving that brought the score to life... Among the solos, principal flutist Yubeen Kim, associate principal clarinetist Matthew Griffith and associate principal oboist James Button made the most of their moments in the spotlight."

San Francisco Classical Voice: [At SF Symphony, Mahler's Third Is Tightly Structured Under Salonen](#) (July 2, 2024)

"The performance was vivid and captivating, without any lapses into garrulousness. The solos jumped out with distinctive clarity, even to a listener far back in the hall. The hushed posthorn solo in the third movement, played here by Aaron Schuman on cornet, was a dramatic highlight."

Critical Acclaim

San Francisco Symphony, 2022–23

San Francisco Classical Voice: [MTT and SF Symphony Take On Danny Elfman's Cello Concerto](#) (November 15, 2022)

"MTT led a big-boned, richly hued performance of [Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings]... We don't often get to hear the strings without the orchestra's full complement of winds and brass, but performances like this make you want to hear more works for strings alone. For the entire program, they were arrayed with first and second violins on either side of the podium, with the basses next to the first violins and the cellos and violas between the violins. They were magnificent, producing a big, dark, deep sound and playing their hearts out for MTT."

The Daily Californian: [SF Symphony roars to life with 'Jurassic Park'](#) (January 12, 2023)

"As Kitsopoulos led with virtuosity, the SF Symphony reflected the film's staggering intensity with mastery, guiding audiences through concentrated action and lighthearted banter. Rows of violins subtly stitched together rare waves of faux serenity, built only to be shattered by acute melodrama. Between high speed chases and door slams, the brass section and bass drum bubbled together with low trepidation."

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Elim Chan and SF Symphony Caught Stargazing](#) (January 16, 2023)

"Even when the music glowered and darkened in Tchaikovsky's brooding manner, brightness always lay ahead. String passages skittered and surged. The horns let out their burnished cries of affirmation. The woodwinds burbled and chattered. The brass triumphed. Timpanist Edward Stephan drove home this splendid performance's rhythmic clarity and drive."

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Herbert Blomstedt Again Delivers in Annual SF Symphony Visit](#) (February 13, 2023)

"Powerful as the melodic lines were, so often it was little touches of tincture in the accompanying instruments, carrying the rhythm and drive, that were most crucial to conveying forward momentum. That just shows the quality in depth of this orchestra and the brilliance of an experienced conductor who can bring those details out with the minimum of gestures. Even in a performance where the greatest emphasis seemed to be on a tender, quiet section in the finale, the pace and tension never slackened for a moment."

San Francisco Chronicle: [S.F. Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas combine for a thrillingly tragic turn](#) (March 31, 2023)

"The entire first movement of this 80-minute juggernaut surged with an almost incandescent fury, filling Davies Symphony Hall with the booming cries of brass and woodwinds proclaiming some sort of Day of Judgment. Principal timpanist Edward Stephan banged the drum with barely veiled ferocity. The dynamic

level seldom dipped below double-forte. It was a wild, scary ride... The symphony's tremendous final tour de force, in which principal percussionist Jacob Nissly ascended to the balcony to bring an enormous hammer down on a solid block – not once, but twice – reverberated through the hall with an implacable clang.”

San Francisco Chronicle: [Review: S.F. Symphony members step to the fore in a virtuoso display](#) (April 14, 2023)

“The heroes of the evening were violinist Alexander Barantschik, the orchestra's longtime concertmaster, and principal oboist Eugene Izotov, who lent Bach's Concerto for Violin and Oboe a sizzle and shimmer that lingered in a listener's memory long after the concert had come to an end... The partnership between the two – trading melodic phrases, breathing together rhythmically as one, melding the different sounds of their respective instruments into a single radiant strand – was a revelatory kind of thrill.”

Seen and Heard International: [Branford Marsalis and a jazzy San Francisco Symphony deliver a thrilling concert](#) (May 6, 2023)

“The orchestra's musicians, under the baton of guest conductor Thomas Wilkins, did something big symphony orchestras seldom can do. They seemed utterly at home with the extensive jazz material. All those great performances under Michael Tilson Thomas of Gershwin tone poems and Broadway musicals clearly were not lost on the orchestra's sensibilities.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [SF Symphony Delivers the Antiwar Message of Britten's War Requiem](#) (May 22, 2023)

“The *Requiem* was the single piece on the program, performed without intermission... The orchestra bristled with vivid percussion – bells, drums, and all manner of clacks and gongs. The brass section contributed mightily with bugle calls and trumpets of doom. As the chorus sang of Judgement Day, the orchestra muttered and lurched in powerful counterpoint to the terrified voices.”

Musical America: [SF Symphony & Co. Power Through Britten's War Requiem](#) (May 23, 2023)

“The orchestra played with fervor and precision, notably in the percussion section, where clangorous chimes, ominous drums, and chattering woodblocks became a fatal through line. The brasses were equally fine, in their blaring fanfares and caustic military marches.”

Critical Acclaim

San Francisco Symphony, 2021–22

The Daily Californian: [San Francisco Symphony's Film with Live Orchestra series breathes new life into 'Apollo 13'](#) (September 30, 2021)

“Whatever the San Francisco Symphony plays, the musicians' sheer skill, evidently built from years upon years of experience, radiates across the entire hall to create a first-tier listening experience.”

Seen and Heard International: [Tetzlaff-Young connection in Elgar's Violin Concerto energizes San Francisco Symphony](#) (December 6, 2021)

“[Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony] began softly with a beautifully rendered clarinet line played by principal Carey Bell... Soulfully rendered solos by principal horn Robert Ward and principal oboe Eugene Izotov highlighted the Andante cantabile second movement, and the recurring theme found its apotheosis in the changing colors from the entire brass section in the majestic finale's reiterations of it.

“Presiding over all of this, from his position at the center back of the orchestra, timpanist Edward Stephan seemed to be driving the bus. The kettle drums have a lot to say in this symphony, especially in the finale, where Stephan's accuracy and rhythmic drive were key to the elation of the final minutes. His flair in executing the arm-crossing show-off moments only added to the effect.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Michael Tilson Thomas Returns to the Podium With the SF Symphony](#) (January 24, 2022)

“The orchestra partnered [Gautier Capuçon] with precision, restraint and playful zest. At once tautly made from its recurring themes and delightfully eccentric, Shostakovich’s Cello Concerto No. 2 gives the ensemble plenty of stunts, including that caterwauling horn fanfare to what must be one of the longest tambourine rattles in symphonic history.

“Prokofiev’s familiar Fifth Symphony occupied the second half of the program... Carey Bell’s clarinet solos were sweetly choice. The percussion section, busy all night, boomed and chattered splendidly. A clarifying sun broke through in the exciting, rhythmically charged measures of the last movement.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Fireworks at Davies Symphony Hall](#) (January 31, 2022)

“The Mahler One that MTT and the orchestra offered was anything but a polished recitation of previous performances. Right away, from the first movement’s tremulous opening and fitful utterances from a horn here, a clarinet there, a sense of effortful exploration, of things at stake, took hold. With the violin sections positioned on opposite sides of the podium, fresh, nearly antiphonal effects brushed on a brighter-than-normal sound. Meanwhile the bass drum sounded an ominous alarm...The final movement was a terror thrill ride and catharsis, led by the blazing brass and horn sections. The wood winds argued sweetly at times, pungently at others. The strings gleamed and glowered. The final measures were almost recklessly exultant, the horns standing for their final charge.”

Musical America: [Salonen, San Francisco, Stravinsky: A Moment to Remember](#) (March 15, 2022)

“Salonen made a big feast of [*The Rite of Spring*], performed here in its 1947 version. The fortissimos were super-charged. The brasses delivered one wallop after another. Pianissimos were so soft as to seem more like murmurs. Mid-movement pauses heightened the tension. Transitions were dramatic. This was high-octane Stravinsky, impolite, impetuous, and sometimes ragged.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Guest Conductor Klaus Mäkelä Elicits a Refined Shostakovich Tenth With SF Symphony](#) (May 2, 2022)

“The Symphony’s string texture was rich and carefully layered, another virtue particularly suited to Shostakovich... It was in the winds that Mäkelä showed some distinctive eccentricity. Having oboes and clarinets add an emphatic bite in the form of a tiny crescendo at the end of held notes made odd little boxes out of some of the wind passages. Overall, the playing was smooth and well balanced, blending together the sections. Shostakovich does not often sound this refined.”

Musical America: [Xian Zhang Leads Tuneful Program at SF Symphony](#) (May 9, 2022)

“Dvořák’s *New World* got an emphatic reading under Zhang’s vivid and demonstrative lead... The musicians responded in kind, with gleaming brass, burnished horns, burbling woodwinds, and surging strings. Timpanist Edward Stephan gave it all a taut rhythmic spine.”

San Francisco Classical Voice: [Karina Canellakis Goes Big With the SF Symphony](#) (May 16, 2022)

“The aggressively pounding opening [of Witold Lutosławski’s Concerto for Orchestra] gives way, by its close, to a bubbling conversation among the triangle, solo winds, and solo violin. The vivacious second movement scurries quietly, but wildly, through the orchestra. Lutosławski closes with a grandly-scaled passacaglia (variations over a repeating bass line), toccata, and chorale. Catherine Payne shone in the first flute chair throughout the work, as did guest piccolo Stephanie McNab.”