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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE / OCTOBER 9, 2025**



**THE SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY YOUTH ORCHESTRA AND WATTIS  
FOUNDATION MUSIC DIRECTOR RADU PAPONIU PERFORM FIVE  
CONCERTS IN THE 2025–26 SEASON**

**November 23 season-opening concert includes works by Johannes Brahms, Antonín Dvořák, and Gabriela Ortiz, as well as Felix Mendelssohn’s *Violin Concerto* featuring violinist Aaron Ma, winner of the 2024–25 SFSYO Concerto Competition**

**2025–26 SFSYO season also features the ensemble’s annual *Peter and the Wolf* performance (December 14); a program of works by Jennifer Higdon, Gustav Mahler, and Jean Sibelius (March 8); and a concert with pieces by Ludwig van Beethoven, Dylan Hall, and Dmitri Shostakovich (May 17)**

**SFSYO hosts the Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival on January 18, featuring five 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 2025–26 season, beginning with their season-opening performance on Sunday, November 23, 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’m really looking forward to my second season leading the incredibly talented musicians of the SFSYO. Our November 23 program features our Concerto Competition winner, the outstanding young violinist Aaron Ma, in Mendelssohn’s beloved Violin Concerto. The concert also explores the lifelong mentoring and friendship between Brahms and Dvořák, alongside Gabriela Ortiz’s vibrant *Kauyumari*. Later in the season, we are delighted to present a new work, Scherzo, written by our own multitalented SFSYO member Dylan Hall, featured on a program with Beethoven’s First Symphony and Shostakovich’s monumental Fifth. This season showcases the limitless potential of these young musicians and the inspiring ways they share their passion for music making,” said Paponiu.

### **San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra performances**

The **November 23** concert features violinist and 2024–25 SFSYO Concerto Competition winner Aaron Ma performing Felix Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto in E minor with Paponiu and the 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. The concert opens with Gabriela Ortiz’s *Kauyumari*, which translates to “blue deer” in Huichol, an indigenous language of Mexico, and is known as a spiritual guide for the Huichol people. The program also includes Johannes Brahms’s *Academic Festival Overture*, which the composer described as “a very boisterous potpourri of student songs,” and Antonín Dvořák’s Bohemian-flavored Symphony No. 8.

The season continues on **December 14** with the annual holiday performance of Sergei Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*. Actor Joshua Dela Cruz returns as guest narrator in this program for the second year in a row, and the concert includes selections from Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *The 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, SF Symphony Music Director Laureate Michael Tilson Thomas, and the late Leonard Nimoy and Robin Williams, among many other lauded actors, comedians, musicians, and public figures.

On **March 8**, Paponiu leads the Orchestra in Jean Sibelius’s tone poem *Finlandia*, a piece that inspired national pride and brought Sibelius personal fame and sweeping popularity, and Jennifer Higdon’s *blue cathedral*, written in memory of Higdon’s younger brother. Paponiu and the Orchestra are joined by soprano Hannah Cho in Gustav Mahler’s expressive Symphony No. 4, in which the composer reflects on memories of his youth.

On **May 17**, Paponiu conducts Scherzo for Orchestra by Dylan Hall, a keyboardist in the SFSYO. He premiered the piece with the Orlando Philharmonic in 2024 after winning the National Young Composers Challenge. The program also includes Ludwig van Beethoven’s energetic Symphony No. 1 and Dmitri Shostakovich’s forceful and triumphant Symphony No. 5.

### **Six SFSYO cellists perform with Gautier Capuçon for *Gaïa***

In addition to these concerts, on **November 16**, SF Symphony Youth Orchestra cellists Timothy Huang, Anthony Jung, Melissa Lam, Ethan Lee, Claire Topper, and Cara Wang perform with cellist Gautier Capuçon in *Gaïa*. This recital features world-premiere works by 16 contemporary composers, commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony in collaboration with Capuçon for this project. Among the composers included in this all-star lineup are Bryce Dessner, Ludovico Einaudi, Joe Hisaishi, Missy Mazzoli, Gabriela Montero, Nico Muhly, Max Richter, Ayanna Witter-Johnson, and more. Read more about the program [here](#).

### **Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival**

On **January 18**, the SFSYO hosts the tenth **Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival (BAYOF)** at Davies Symphony Hall. Conceived in 2009, the biennial festival showcases some of the Bay Area's most talented youth orchestral ensembles, including the California Youth Symphony, Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra, Santa Rosa Symphony Youth Orchestra, and Young People's Symphony Orchestra. Each orchestra takes turns performing onstage, and the concert concludes with a piece by the Festival Orchestra, comprised of selected musicians from all five ensembles. The program includes Giuseppe Verdi's Overture to *Nabucco*, Paul Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Johannes Brahms's *Academic Festival Overture*, the first movement of Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 8, Gabriela Lena Frank's Pinkillo Serrano from *Apu: Tone Poem for Orchestra*, the final movement of Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5, and the final movement of Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10. KPIX television anchor emerita Wendy Tokuda serves as master of ceremonies at the concert. 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. 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, Midori, Vladimir Feltsman, Robert Levin, Charles Yang, Rachel Barton Pine, Nancy Zhou, Stella Chen, and the Ébène Quartet. Paponiu has served as cover conductor with the Dallas Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, and Konzerthausorchester Berlin, and he has assisted conductors including Iván Fischer, Fabio Luisi, Stéphane Denève, Andrey Boreyko, Hans Graf, Donald Runnicles, Cristian Măcelaru, 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.

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 San Francisco with his wife, Blair Francis Paponiu, SF Symphony Associate Principal Flute. In his spare time, he enjoys chamber music reading parties, fishing, biking, and playing tennis.

#### **Aaron Ma, winner of the 2024–25 SFSYO Concerto Competition**

Aaron Ma began his music journey by learning piano at the age of three with his mother, pianist Hang Li. He started his violin studies at five with Zhao Wei. He studied piano with William Wellborn in the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Precollege from 2019–2022 and currently studies violin with Zhao Wei at the Conservatory. Additionally, Ma studies under Ian Swensen and is coached by David Chernyavsky from the San Francisco Symphony. He has been a San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra member since 2022.

Ma has received numerous top prizes from various competitions. Most notably, he is the winner of the 2024–25 San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra Concerto Competition, as well as the 2023 Pacific Musical Society & Foundation Annual Competition.

Ma has played in masterclasses with notable violinists including Arnaud Sussman, Simon James, and Alexander Barantschik. Additionally, he has been coached in chamber music by the Alexander String Quartet, Telegraph Quartet, Calidore String Quartet, and the Ying Quartet.

In the summer of 2023, Ma was invited to participate in Music@Menlo and the Bowdoin International Music Festival, where he studied under Ayano Ninomiya from the New England Conservatory. During the summer of 2024, at the Meadowmount School of Music, Ma studied under Gerardo Ribeiro from Northwestern University. In the summer of 2025, he was invited to the Young Artist Institute of Chamber Music Northwest, and he toured East Asia with the National Youth Orchestra of the USA, alongside Ray Chen, Clara Jumi Kang, and Gianandrea Noseda.

#### **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 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's 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, who 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](https://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 14 and the Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival on January 18.

##### **Location:**

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

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#### **YOUTH ORCHESTRA**

**San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra**

Sunday, November 23, 2025, at 2:00pm

**Radu Paponiu** conductor

**Aaron Ma** violin

Winner, 2024–25 SF Symphony Youth Orchestra Concerto Competition

**San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra**

**GABRIELA ORTIZ** *Kauyumari*

**FELIX MENDELSSOHN** Violin Concerto in E minor

JOHANNES BRAHMS *Academic Festival Overture*

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK *Symphony No. 8*

Tickets: \$40–75

Ticket link: [sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/YOUTH-ORCHESTRA-NOV](https://sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/YOUTH-ORCHESTRA-NOV)

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## HOLIDAY

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

Sunday, December 14, 2025, at 2:00pm

Radu Paponiu conductor

Joshua Dela Cruz narrator

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY Selections from *The Nutcracker Suite*

SERGEI PROKOFIEV *Peter and the Wolf*

TRADITIONAL Carol Sing-along

Tickets: \$19.50–149 (tickets for children and young adults under 18 are 50% off)

Ticket link: [sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/PETER-AND-THE-WOLF](https://sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/PETER-AND-THE-WOLF)

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## YOUTH ORCHESTRA

Bay Area Youth Orchestra Festival

Sunday, January 18, 2026, at 3:00pm

California Youth Symphony

Marin Symphony Youth Orchestra

San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra

Santa Rosa Symphony Youth Orchestra

Young People's Symphony Orchestra

GIUSEPPE VERDI *Overture to Nabucco*

PAUL DUKAS *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*

JOHANNES BRAHMS *Academic Festival Overture*

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK *Allegro con brio from Symphony No. 8*

**GABRIELA LENA FRANK** Pinkillo Serrano from *Apu: Tone Poem for Orchestra*

**SERGEI PROKOFIEV** Allegro giocoso from Symphony No. 5

**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH** Andante–Allegro from Symphony No. 10

Tickets: \$25–70 (tickets for children and young adults under 18 are 50% off)

Ticket link: [sfsymphony.org/BAYOFestival](https://sfsymphony.org/BAYOFestival)

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**YOUTH ORCHESTRA**

**San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra**

Sunday, March 8, 2026, at 2:00pm

**Radu Paponiu** conductor

**Hannah Cho** soprano

**San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra**

**JEAN SIBELIUS** *Finlandia*

**JENNIFER HIGDON** *blue cathedral*

**GUSTAV MAHLER** Symphony No. 4

Tickets: \$40–75

Ticket link: [sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/YOUTH-ORCHESTRA-MAR](https://sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/YOUTH-ORCHESTRA-MAR)

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**YOUTH ORCHESTRA**

**San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra**

Sunday, May 17, 2026, at 7:30pm

**Radu Paponiu** conductor

**San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra**

**DYLAN HALL** Scherzo for Orchestra

**LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN** Symphony No. 1

**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH** Symphony No. 5

Tickets: \$40–75

Ticket link: [sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/YOUTH-ORCHESTRA-MAY](https://sfsymphony.org/Buy-Tickets/2025-26/YOUTH-ORCHESTRA-MAY)

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