

CALIFORNIA SYMPHONY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press contact: Christina Jensen, Jensen Artists
646.536.7864 x1 | christina@jensenartists.com

California Symphony's 2025-2026 Season Concludes with HEROIC RACHMANINOFF

Led by Donato Cabrera, Artistic & Music Director
Featuring Pianist Sofya Gulyak

A Thrilling Season Finale Featuring Rachmaninoff's Dazzling Piano Concerto,
Borodin's Dramatic Symphony, and a World Premiere by California Symphony's
Resident Composer Saad Haddad



Photos of Sofya Gulyak, Donato Cabrera, and Saad Haddad available in high resolution [here](#).

In Concert May 9 at 7:30pm May 10, 2026 at 4:00pm
At Walnut Creek's Leshar Center for the Arts
Tickets & Information: www.californiasymphony.org

WALNUT CREEK, CA – California Symphony and Artistic and Music Director Donato Cabrera conclude the 2025-2026 season with **HEROIC RACHMANINOFF** – a thrilling season finale featuring **Rachmaninoff's** dazzling Piano Concerto No. 3 performed by internationally acclaimed pianist **Sofya Gulyak**, **Borodin's** dramatic Symphony No. 2, and the world premiere of *Urab* by California's Resident Composer **Saad Haddad** – on **Saturday, May 9, 2026 at 7:30pm** and **Sunday, May 10, 2026 at 4:00pm** at Hofmann Theatre at the **Leshar Center for the Arts** (1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek). Tickets include a free 30-minute pre-concert talk by award-winning instructor Scott Foglesong, one hour before the performances.

These May performances include the third and final commission for the California Symphony by Resident Composer Saad Haddad, whose music explores the relationship between the West and the East and has been praised by *The New York Times* for “achiev[ing] a remarkable fusion of idioms.” Sofya Gulyak, First Prize winner of the 2009 Leeds International Piano Competition, takes on one of the most celebrated and challenging concertos ever written – Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 – often called the “Mount Everest” of piano concertos for its legendary degree of difficulty. The concerts conclude with Alexander Borodin's Symphony No. 2, composed intermittently between 1869 and 1876 due to the demands of the composer's primary career as a chemist and physician. The work is filled with dramatic energy and rich

melodies inspired by Russian folklore – a bold, heroic sound that combines mighty rhythms with lush orchestral textures.

“Music, like food, has always been a great crossroads for seemingly divergent pathways and cultures, and we explore this nexus point with the three compositions on this concert,” Donato Cabrera says. “Sounds, rhythms, and musical forms often commingle and work together to form new avenues of expression before they can be named or categorized, and our departing composer in residence, Saad Haddad, has taught us this time and again with his hauntingly beautiful compositions. The concerto and symphony, as compositional forms, were explored in depth in the Germanic composition tradition – think Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms – but it was the Russian composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that, through their fearless experimentation and mastery of orchestration, showed a new way forward in both genres. It is interesting to note that both Borodin and Rachmaninoff were more well known in other professions than composition during their lifetimes: Borodin as a highly successful scientist and Rachmaninoff as a pianist and conductor. And I argue that it is precisely because of their outsider perspectives, both culturally and professionally, that they were able to write such groundbreaking and inspired compositions.”

Urab, which means “flicker or shimmer” in Arabic, is the third and final piece for the California Symphony written by **Saad Haddad**, who has been Resident Composer since 2023. In Arabic music, urab (pronounced OO-rahb) refers to fast, trill-like ornaments. For his new piece, Haddad makes these trills the central musical idea rather than ornamental or decorative, expanding them throughout the orchestra. He says, “The trills draw on the *maqam* system of Arabic music, which requires the orchestra members to play pitches outside the normal realm of what they are used to on their instruments. At other moments, I westernize these pitches, and we hear something closer to the traditional orchestral sound we know, all still in the guise of these ornamental figures. This back and forth mirrors my own experience as someone born and raised in the United States whose blood comes from countries very far away. *Urab* is a reflection on that experience, told through the lens of these minute gestures that Arabic musicians have perfected for centuries, explored here from the surface all the way down.”

Russian composer **Sergei Rachmaninoff** (who was also an accomplished pianist) wrote his Piano Concerto No. 3 in the summer of 1909 in Dresden, Germany, and premiered it that fall in New York. The concerto, known as one of the most difficult piano concertos in the repertoire, is a sprawling, Romantic masterpiece, requiring not only formidable virtuosity but interpretive sensitivity from the pianist. California Symphony’s soloist Sofya Gulyak – the first woman to win the Leeds International Piano Competition – is more than up to the task. Known for her interpretations of Rachmaninoff and other Russian masters, Gulyak (who hails originally from Kazan, Russia) has been described as “a fearless pianist, never afraid to scale the most technically demanding heights of the repertoire and equally proud to wear her heart on her sleeve,” by *The Guardian*.

Alexander Borodin's Symphony No. 2 is considered one of the finest Russian symphonies of the 19th century. Composed between 1869 and 1876, it brims with raw energy. The composition had a meandering creation period during which Borodin incorporated music from a stalled opera that he was simultaneously composing; put it aside due to the demands of his career as a scientist; revisited it after exploring newly modernized brass instruments with another famed Russian composer, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov; experienced a less than successful world premiere in 1877 due to too-slow tempos; and received encouragement on it from none other than Hungarian composer and pianist Franz Liszt, who told him, “Go on working, even if your works are not performed or published, even if they get bad reviews. Believe me, they will make their own way.” The result is a work that not only succeeded in its time, but influenced composers such as Debussy and Ravel, remaining an inspiration until today.

Season tickets are now available for California Symphony’s 2026-2027 season – celebrating 40 years of bringing vibrant orchestral music to the Bay Area – which features five compelling programs over ten performances at Hoffman Theatre at the **Leshner Center for the Performing Arts** from September 2026 to May 2027, plus the return of California Symphony’s **Holiday Traditions** concerts in December 2026. Next season, California Symphony also welcomes its next **Composer-in-Residence, Paul Novak**, who will write three new works for the orchestra over the course of his three-season residency. California Symphony’s signature programming will continue to approach orchestral music as storytelling, with next season exploring American connections across continents and generations; musical contemporaries from Russia and America; the grandeur of the Enlightenment era in Paris; California innovators alongside Beethoven’s bold optimism; and evocative orchestral landscapes from Spain, Mexico, and Italy. World-class soloists join the orchestra in riveting concertos, including cellist **Julian Schwarz** in **Jennifer Higdon's** Cello Concerto, clarinetist **Cory Tiffin** in **Aaron Copland's** Clarinet Concerto, violinist **Helen Kim** in **John Adams' Violin Concerto**, and pianist **Tanya Gabrielian** in **Manuel de Falla's** *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*.

California Symphony continues to serve its community beyond the stage through its nationally recognized educational initiative **Sound Minds** and will expand its innovative lifelong learning program **Fresh Look: The Symphony Exposed** to two communities in Lafayette and San Ramon (July 2026). It will also continue and expand its community partnerships with the **Amateur Music Network** and the **Trinity Center Walnut Creek**.

Founded in 1986, California Symphony has been led by Donato Cabrera since 2013. Its concert season at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek, California serves a growing number of music lovers from across the Bay Area. California Symphony believes that the concert experience should be fun and inviting, and its mission is to create a welcoming, engaging, and inclusive environment for the entire community. Through this commitment to community, imaginative programming, and its support of emerging composers, California Symphony is a leader among orchestras in California and a model for regional orchestras everywhere.

Single tickets start at \$50 and at \$25 for students 25 and under. More information is available at CaliforniaSymphony.org or call the Leshner Center Ticket Office at (925) 943-7469 (open Wed – Sun, 12pm to 6pm).

FOR CALENDAR EDITORS:

WHAT: California Symphony's season finale concerts, HEROIC RACHMANINOFF, feature Rachmaninoff's dazzling piano concerto, Borodin's dramatic symphony, and the world premiere performances of *Urab*, the third and final commission for the California Symphony by Resident Composer Saad Haddad, whose music explores the relationship between the West and the East. Sofya Gulyak, First Prize winner of the 2009 Leeds International Piano Competition, takes on one of the most celebrated and challenging concertos ever written – Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 – often called the "Mount Everest" of piano concertos for its legendary degree of difficulty. The concerts conclude with Alexander Borodin's Symphony No. 2, composed intermittently between 1869 and 1876 due to the demands of the composer's primary career as a chemist and physician. The work is filled with dramatic energy and rich melodies inspired by Russian folklore – a bold, heroic sound that combines mighty rhythms with lush orchestral textures.

California Symphony takes the stuffiness out of the concert experience: Take selfies at the photo booth, order a signature cocktail, and sip at your seat. Tickets include a free 30-minute pre-concert talk by award-winning instructor Scott Foglesong, starting one hour before the show.

WHEN:

Saturday, May 9, 2026 at 7:30pm

Sunday, May 10, 2026 at 4pm

WHERE:

Hofmann Theatre at the Leshner Center for the Arts
1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek

CONCERT:

HEROIC RACHMANINOFF

Donato Cabrera, conductor
California Symphony

PROGRAM:

Saad Haddad: *Urab* (World Premiere)

Sergei Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 3

Sofya Gulyak, piano

Alexander Borodin: Symphony No. 2

TICKETS: Single tickets start at \$55 and at \$25 for students 25 and under. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit CaliforniaSymphony.org or call the Leshner Center Ticket Office at (925) 943-7469 (open Wed – Sun, 12pm to 6pm).

PHOTOS: Available [here](#)

ABOUT THE CALIFORNIA SYMPHONY:

Founded in 1986, California Symphony has been led by Artistic and Music Director Donato Cabrera since 2013. It is distinguished by its vibrant concert programs that span the breadth of orchestral repertoire, including works by American composers and by living composers. Its concert season at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek, California serves a growing number of music lovers from across the Bay Area.

California Symphony believes that the concert experience should be fun and inviting, and its mission is to create a welcoming, engaging, and inclusive environment for the entire community. Through this commitment to community, imaginative programming, and its support of emerging composers, California Symphony is a leader among orchestras in California and a model for regional orchestras everywhere.

Since 1991, California Symphony's three-year Young American Composer-in-Residence program has provided a composer with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to collaborate with the orchestra over three consecutive years to create, rehearse, premiere, and record three major orchestra compositions, one each season. Every Composer-in-Residence has gone on to win top honors and accolades in the field, including the Rome Prize, Pulitzer Prize, Grammy Awards, and more.

The orchestra's nationally recognized educational initiative Sound Minds impacts students' trajectories by providing instruction for violin or cello and musicianship skills. Sound Minds has proven to contribute directly to improved reading and math proficiencies and character development, as students set and achieve goals, learn communication and problem-solving skills, and gain self-confidence. Inspired by the El Sistema program of Venezuela, the program is offered completely free of charge to the students and families of Downer Elementary School in San Pablo, California.

Through its innovative adult education program Fresh Look: The Symphony Exposed, California Symphony provides lifelong learners a fun-filled introduction to the orchestra and classical music. Led by celebrated educator and California Symphony program annotator Scott Foglesong, these live classes are held over four weeks in the summer annually.

In 2017, California Symphony became the first orchestra with a public statement of a commitment to diversity. Its website is available in both Spanish and English.

Reaching far beyond the performance hall, since 2020 the orchestra's concerts have been broadcast nationally on multiple radio series through Classical California (KUSC/KDFC) and the WFMT Radio Network, reaching over 1.5 million listeners across the country.

For more information, visit [CaliforniaSymphony.org](https://www.californiasymphony.org).

California Symphony's 2025-26 season is sponsored by the Lesher Foundation.