

Conductor's debut shakes the rafters

Venezuela's Rafael Payare promises to transform the San Diego Symphony.

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MUSIC CRITIC

SAN DIEGO — California is orchestra.

The colossal Los Angeles Philharmonic centennial season is dominating the world symphony landscape. Meanwhile, its conductor laureate, Esa-Pekka Salonen, has just accepted the San Francisco Symphony's audacious offer to refashion that orchestra into a state-of-the-21st-century-art institution.

Now it is our state's second-largest city's turn to make its symphony matter.

Founded in 1910, the San Diego Symphony is older than the San Francisco Symphony (by a year) and the L.A. Phil, but it has had a checkered history. The orchestra twice disbanded in its early years. In modern times, the institution has gone from famine (bankruptcy in 1996) to feast (a Joan and Irwin Jacobs \$120 million donation in 2002).

San Diego has had capable music directors, but only recently has the symphony begun to show Californian cultural farsightedness. Last January it sponsored a performance of John Luther Adams' percussive piece, "Inuksuit," that was performed along the Tijuana border, with San Diego musicians on one side and Mexican ones on the other.

A couple of weeks later, the San Diego Symphony announced the appointment of the electrifying Venezuelan conductor Rafael Payare as its next music director.

A former Gustavo Dudamel assistant at the L.A. Phil who has been building an impressive career in Europe, Payare returned to San Diego last week for his first concerts as music director designate (he begins his tenure in July). Payare raised the roof of Copley Symphony Hall conducting Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony on Sunday afternoon.

It is a roof that needs raising in more ways than one. The hall is dispiriting, a renovated 1929 movie palace in a bland 34-story office building in San Diego's downtown financial district. The area is not lively on weekends, when most concerts are held. Acoustics are ungracious.

Under such circumstances, connecting the lis-



NANCEE E. LEWIS

RAFAEL PAYARE conducts the San Diego Symphony last week as music director designate during its Hearing the Future festival.

tener with the music and the music with the community could appear a thankless challenge.

Yet the orchestra has begun devoting January to a Hearing the Future festival that, as with "Inuksuit" last year, extends its reach to include pressing political issues that involve a much wider swath of the city's population than the orchestra ever before served.

A Latino music director makes a lot of sense in the country's most important border city. A vibrant music director makes even more sense. Hearing the Future makes the most sense of all.

This year's festival happens to be curated by composer, conductor, Los Angeles Opera artist-in-residence and recent MacArthur fellow Matthew Aucoin. Along with relatively standard orchestra programs, it includes dance, jazz, museum and gallery events, education, new music and even DJs on both sides of the border.

On Sunday, a staggering one-man music theater program by baritone Davóne

Tines in a small alternative arts space followed the large orchestra matinee. Together they demonstrated what an orchestra can and must do. Copley, one quickly learned, isn't the only San Diego roof requiring raising.

Payare's symphony program was pointed and ambitious. He paired Benjamin Britten's Cello Symphony with Shostakovich's vast Tenth Symphony. The soloist in the Britten was Alisa Weilerstein, one of today's most expressive cellists and Payare's wife.

There was probably a lot of subtext. Shostakovich's Tenth was a reaction to Stalin's death in 1953, the hour-long symphony being an amplification of a dictator's reign of terror. Shostakovich dutifully reflects on the horrors Stalin spawned but can't keep from mocking Stalin's grotesqueries and finally all but dancing on his nemesis' grave.

A dozen years ago, I heard Dudamel conduct a considered, triumphant performance of the symphony with the Simón Bolívar Youth Or-

chestra of Venezuela at the Proms in London. Payare was the orchestra's glowing principal horn. Members of the audience unfurled Venezuelan flags. It was a glorious occasion.

Now that so much Venezuelan promise has been short-circuited by its own political crisis, Payare took Shostakovich fully at his horrific Stalinist word and then further amplified the horror. The San Diegans played like an orchestra transformed. Loud won't do. They shook the rafters. The good news is that an acoustician has been hired to see whether the rafters can be made to shake more fluidly.

In the first half of the concert, which began with a particularly robust performance of Strauss' "Don Juan," Britten's symphony had its own special urgency. Written for cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, who was introduced to Britten by Shostakovich, the score is as dark as the Tenth with again an effort at overcoming adversity at the end. Encouraged by Payare, Weilerstein played with a raw

abandon that few cellists (not even Rostropovich) have dared in this work.

After the concert I walked the mile to Sandbox, a former industrial building newly renovated as a performance space in the rapidly gentrifying East Village. All around are grotesque new apartment buildings that look as though they took their inspiration from Legoland.

San Diego has, as elsewhere, a terrible homeless problem, but the East Village felt particularly callous. I witnessed not one, not two, but three confrontations between oblivious operators of electric scooters and terrorized pedestrians or street people. Raucous partying on the patios of sports bars took place within feet of ignored hungry beggars.

To a visitor, this San Diego looked like a candidate for the most tasteless and thoughtless major city on the West Coast.

But Tines' astonishing "Were You There" proved a powerful counterforce. The stage was bare but for a folding chair and 11 naked light

bulbs, each signifying a young black life lost to a racial attack. Accompanied by pianist Michael Schachter, Tines meditated on loss in a handful of spirituals, traditional songs and Aucoin's "A Clear Midnight," set to a Walt Whitman text.

After singing "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," in which Tines absorbed, Christ-like, the world's troubles for our sake, he folded the chair and placed it on the ground like a lifeless body. He then lay next to it and sang, on his back, "We Shall Overcome" — first with an out-of-body virility, then with an out-of-body quietude.

The performance, directed by Zack Winokur, lasted only a little over a half-hour, and the San Diego Symphony had no business charging \$40 for all seats.

But it has all the business in the world bringing overwhelming humanity to exactly the place where it is needed. It has taken more than a century, but California now has another crucial orchestra.

Museum is bringing craft into the now

[Craft, from E1] meanings for different people.

"It's historical, it's international, it's traditional, it's so many things," Isken said. That can be confusing to visitors, she said. As a noncollecting museum, Craft Contemporary doesn't have the same commitment to historical works that other museums might, though it does plan to offer educational programs about the history of craft.

"We're looking more at the process, the hands-on, the materiality," she said. "And we felt that by calling ourselves the Craft & Folk Art Museum, that it was a little limiting."

Cross-disciplinary artists, experimentation within media and the blurring of lines between formerly siloed categories of art, such as "outsider art," all point to a trend away from categorization, Isken said.

"We feel like folk is a kind of craft; we don't see it as a separate category," she said. "All this stuff — folk art, craft, contemporary art, fine art, high art, low art, street art — it all comes together in one category: art. So for us, those categories aren't useful anymore. If you're weaving in Oaxaca, it's craft."

The change, Isken said, isn't meant to signal a shift in programming.

"What you've seen here over the last eight years is what you'll continue to see," she said.

Isken's museum has aimed to blur boundaries, she said, showing fine artists working in glass, metal, cut paper and even sugar alongside craft artists working conceptually. In 2015 it showed functional sculptural works by L.A. shoe designer Chris Francis; in 2016 it exhibited the painter and performance artist Gronk's work in theatrical set design; and in 2017 it showed artist Betye Saar's washboard assemblage works.

Art historian and craft specialist Jenni Sorkin said the new name is not only more fitting but also a branding necessity in the L.A. museum landscape. The surrounding Miracle Mile neighborhood's profile is rising. The Academy Museum of Motion Pictures plans to open later this year, and the L.A. County Museum of Art aims to break ground on its new building early next year, opening in 2024 shortly after a new subway line deposits more visitors into the area.

"They're the only space in the city other than the Craft in America Center, a small storefront space that's very under-recognized, focused on showing contemporary craft," Sorkin said. "So I think this focuses and consolidates the mission — to acknowledge studio craft history but moving forward into the 21st century."

The name change will be the institution's second in 53 years. Artist and patron (and actor Noah Wyle's mom) Ed-



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

SUZANNE ISKEN, Craft Contemporary executive director, says there won't be any shift in programming.

ith Robinson Wyle founded a cafe and commercial gallery, the Egg & the Eye, in 1965. When it transitioned to a nonprofit museum in 1973, it was renamed the Craft & Folk Art Museum.

Rebranding, particularly in a social media-driven marketing landscape, is no small feat, and challenges lie ahead. For better or worse, the museum is known as "CAFAM" (pronounced *CAFF-am*) and may lose traction in Google searches when the URL changes. But the awkward acronym was always an issue, Isken said.

"It doesn't mean anything. If you don't know us, what is CAFAM? It could be OXFAM, it could be ANYFAM," she joked.

Pushback to the name change will be inevitable. Some may see it as a dis-

pute over who will educate the public about folk traditions. At a time when Los Angeles is seeing more contemporary ceramics, textiles, fashion and furniture design displayed in art galleries and design boutiques, and is seeing more contemporary art museums open here, does the city need another museum focusing on contemporary artists? Will some people object to what appears to be a turn away from folk art or art from non-Western cultures?

"There's always pushback because we're going forward," Isken said. "But there's nothing in our name or our mission that says we wouldn't show work from non-Western cultures. We aim to be more diverse."

Diluting the focus on folk art could create an opportu-

nity for other institutions such as the Fowler Museum at UCLA, the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana or LACMA, which is currently exhibiting "Outliers and American Vanguard Art," a show partly about folk art.

"That's what makes L.A. such a rich, cultural landscape," Isken said, "all the choices."

To mark its name change, Craft Contemporary will stage two free panels this spring: one on the history of the museum and the other, at which Sorkin will appear, on the future of craft.

The first shows to debut under the new name will be "Trinidad / Joy Station," a solo exhibition of work by L.A.-based Salvadoran artist Beatriz Cortez, and the third iteration of the Farhang Foundation biennial, "Focus

Iran 3: Contemporary Photography and Video," which this year spotlights Iranian youth. Both exhibitions open Jan. 27.

In 2018, the museum launched a ceramics biennial, "Melting Point," which featured more than 27 living American artists experimenting with clay processes.

In January 2020, Craft Contemporary will stage the second iteration of the biennial "The Body, the Object, the Other," focusing on representational forms in clay.

A new website is coming this April, at which point the museum will commission an artist to redo its façade.

"We're thinking of 'craft' as a verb — the process of making, of turning materials and ideas into something," Isken said. "That's what defines us going forward."