

THINGS TO DO > MUSIC AND CONCERTS

San Diego Symphony CEO Martha Gilmer is Musical America's 2026 Impresario of the Year

This year's other honorees include pianist Emanuel Ax, composer Gabriela Lena Frank, singer Gerald Finley and conductor Jakub Hrusa.



Martha Gilmer has been the president and CEO of the San Diego Symphony since 2014 (Todd Rosenberg)



By **GEORGE VARGA** | george.varga@sduniontribune.com | The San Diego Union-Tribune

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San Diego Symphony President and CEO Martha Gilmer has been selected as Impresario of the Year by Musical America, the country's oldest and most prestigious classical music publication. The announcement was made Tuesday morning.

Gilmer, who has headed the symphony since 2014, is only the second person in Musical America's 127-year history to earn this honor. The first — in 2007 — was Michael Kaiser, who from 2001 to 2014 was the president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C.

"Martha Gilmer's Impresario of the Year award recognizes her extraordinary efforts on behalf of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. Her work has not only transformed the organization; it has had a significant impact on the community as a whole," said Fred Cohn, the features editor of Musical America International Directory of the Performing Arts.

Gilmer is in esteemed company.

[Musical America's four other 2026 honorees](#), also announced Tuesday morning, include: Ukrainian pianist Emanuel Ax (Artist of the Year); Canadian bass-baritone Gerald Finley (Vocalist of the Year); Czechoslovakia's Jakub Hrůša (Conductor of the Year); and California's Gabriela Lena Frank (Composer of the Year). Frank's Spanish-language opus, "El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego," received its 2022 world premiere in a San Diego Opera production.

"I'm incredibly honored. And I am humbled because I have fabulous colleagues that I have learned so much from in my many years in this role," Gilmer told the Union-Tribune Monday.

"I hope to accept this award on behalf of all the people who have gotten our cultural institutions through some particularly tight times — and who have reimagined the role of an orchestra through the decades, allowed it to grow and to change, and always believed in how important it is for a city to have a great orchestra."



San Diego Symphony Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare, left, and Symphony President and CEO Martha Gilmer have worked closely together since Payare came on board in 2019. (Todd Rosenberg)

During her 11-year tenure here, Gilmer has been instrumental in helping the San Diego Symphony expand its horizons in several ways, beginning with the selection of Music and Artistic Director Rafael Payare, who came on board in 2019.

This was followed by the 2021 opening of The Rady Shell at Jacobs Park, the orchestra's \$85 million outdoor concert venue alongside San Diego Bay, and the \$163 million rebuilding of the symphony's indoor Jacobs Music Center, which reopened last fall after four years of redesign work and construction.

"I was given an incredible opportunity when I came here because the leadership of the San Diego Symphony had big dreams," said Gilmer, who was previously the Chicago Symphony's Vice President for Artistic Planning and Audience Development. "What we have done would not be possible without the dreamers and the people who support the orchestra."

Gilmer was previously honored as one of Musical America's Top 30 Professionals of the Year in 2021.

"We don't usually give these honors to producers/presenters/impresarios," Musical America's Cohn said by phone Monday from New York.

"Something has happened in San Diego that hasn't happened at America's long-established musical institutions. Martha has moved your orchestra and its operations to a whole new level. Being a community resource is essential for a contemporary musical organization, and that is something Martha clearly understands."

Those sentiments are shared by Payare, whose international profile has risen since he began conducting the orchestra here. He is also the music director for the Montreal Symphony, a position he assumed in 2021.

"I am so happy that Martha is receiving this recognition, as she is a truly visionary leader," Payare said Monday via email.

"From the very beginning of our partnership, she has worked tirelessly on behalf of the San Diego Symphony, constantly inspiring everyone within the organization through her remarkable leadership. No matter how complex a project may seem, with Martha, as soon as we are close to completing one, we immediately begin dreaming about the next..."

"Even through the extraordinary challenges we have faced, including the pandemic, what the San Diego Symphony has achieved under her leadership is remarkable. Today, we have two world-class venues, and the orchestra is soaring artistically and receiving ever greater recognition. I am deeply proud and grateful to have partnered with Martha in serving this remarkable orchestra and the San Diego community."

Gilmer's Musical America award is her latest honor. She was honored as the 2025 Director of the Year by the Corporate Directors Forum, named a 2024 Cool Women honoree by the Girl Scouts of San Diego and received the 2022 Moving San Diego Forward Award from the Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Looking ahead to the next five years, Gilmer is working to have the San Diego Symphony do more recordings and tour abroad to grow its national and international reputation.

"It's imperative that people, the stakeholders, feel included and that their ideas are heard," she said. "It is also critical that we are part of the fabric of this community. One of the things I'm so proud of is that we take our music to people who cannot get to our stages. In just the past two weeks we have had some of our musicians perform at three San Diego medical facilities and at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar and Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility.

"We do this all the time, not just the holiday season. Knowing that we are making a positive impact on people is inspiring to me and is crucial to what this orchestra does."

2025 > December > 16