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## Cabrera marks 10 years of innovation at Cal Symphony

Music director continues 'adventurous,' outside-the-box concert programs

By Georgia Rowe  
Correspondent

Donato Cabrera admits that he was well into programming the California Symphony's 2022-23 season before he realized it was his 10th year as the organization's music director.

"I wanted to go back and make sure not to repeat myself, to see what was missing," he said. "I started counting, and it was 10 seasons."

Fans of Cabrera and the Walnut Creek-based orchestra might also have missed the milestone. But the past decade has seen the conductor accomplishing great things — revitalizing the organization with smart programs and offstage innovations, making the California Symphony one of the region's most vibrant musical attractions.

Cabrera, who held previous resident conductor posts with the San Francisco Symphony and Opera, and also currently serves as music director of the Las Vegas Philharmonic, has brought in young resident composers such as Katherine Balch — who capped her residency with "Illuminate," which Cabrera conducted in its dazzling world premiere in March of this year — and current resident Viet Cuong, scheduled to unveil a

### CALIFORNIA SYMPHONY

Presents "All Things Strings," a program of works by Elgar, Dvorak, Gerald Finzi and Grazyna Bacewicz; featuring pianist Elizabeth Dorman

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 4 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Leshner Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek

**Tickets:** \$49-\$79;  
californiasymphony.org

new work later this season.

He's also elevated the orchestra's programs by delving into overlooked corners of the repertoire. His 2021 performances of Vaughan Williams' Symphony No. 5 brought a powerful sense of discovery; last month, Cabrera opened the 2022-23 season with music by contemporary composer Anna Clyne, along with works by Kodály, Tchaikovsky and Ukrainian composer Myroslav Skoryk.

This week, Cabrera returns with another attractive program. Titled "All Things Strings," it includes Elgar's "Introduction and Allegro" and Dvorak's "Serenade for Strings"; pianist Elizabeth Dorman joins the orchestra for Gerald Finzi's "Eclogue for Strings." Polish composer Grazyna Bacewicz's "Concerto for String Orchestra" completes the



KRISTEN LOKEN — CALIFORNIA SYMPHONY

California Symphony music director Donato Cabrera is marking his 10th year with the Walnut Creek orchestra.

lineup.

In a recent interview, Cabrera said his work relies on strong connections with the symphony's audiences, "making sure they're along for the ride."

"We never assume that they're going to just buy the ticket," he said, "that in our e-mail blasts, the California Symphony blog and other programs, we give them as many opportunities as possible to learn about someone like Katherine Balch — why she's composing a piece, or why I program orchestra pieces together. It's our hope that they never feel like they're not part of the process. I think that's why we've been able to keep the audience, and it's why I can be quite adventurous in my programming."

While traditional orchestral programs often hew to a tried and true formula — a short work and a concerto, followed after inter-

mission by a symphony — Cabrera says he builds programs around a narrative. In the case of "All Things Strings," he says, "two narratives come together — the idea of soloists and orchestra, and Eastern European composers writing for string orchestra. To me, that's something more compelling, to share this narrative about these composers, these forms of music."

The California Symphony musicians are clearly on the same page, says Cabrera, noting that there's been little turnover in the orchestra's ranks since he became music director. He believes his choices resonate with the players: That was apparent, he says, in rehearsals for the performances of the Vaughan Williams Fifth. "I believe there was only one person in the orchestra who had ever played it before," he said. "It was exciting, for all of us."

It was also, for many of the musicians, the first large orchestra piece they had played since before the pandemic. Cabrera says California Symphony was one of the first orchestras to present a full program during that period. "The nature of the piece — and that's exactly why I wanted to program it — has such an incredibly healing property. That sense of healing, the sense of discovery, was in the rehearsals, and it was palpable at the concert. We were all experiencing that communal act of concertgoing for the first time again."

Looking ahead, Cabrera says there's much to be excited about — including the March 2023 concert, which features works by Zemlinsky, Alma Mahler and 19th-century Austrian composer Hans Rott. "It's a program where we get to learn about Mahler, by not performing Mahler," he says. Resident

composer Cuong will unveil a new work in May.

After accidentally discovering it was his 10th season, Cabrera is feeling optimistic.

"It's given me an opportunity for reflection, because these days, music directors don't often stick around that long," he says. "I'm thankful that I've been able to last this long with the California Symphony, but also I feel so proud of what we've accomplished over these 10 years."

"The fact that we've been able to have these ideas, and then implement them, is beyond just being around for 10 years," he adds. "We've really been able to do something in Walnut Creek that most regional orchestras have never been able to do, and that's very special. I feel very fortunate."

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