

Conductor's Note



Steven Schick, Music Director
Photo: courtesy of San Diego UT

If you are like me, springtime in 2019 has been a dizzying, breathtaking affair with one kaleidoscopic burst of color after another vying for our attention. My near-daily walks at the Torrey Pines State Park have become meditations on beauty and gratitude. Yes, let's hear it for the rain!

And, in the midst of this year's riotous blooming and blossoming, we at the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus are hard at work on what seems, at first glance, to be the least spring-like musical program imaginable.

We start with the urban grit of Julia Wolfe's *Fuel*, another in the collaborations between Wolfe and film-maker Bill Morrison. (Some audience members may remember our performance of Michael Gordon's *Gotham* with a film by Morrison in 2016.) In *Fuel* for string orchestra, driving rhythms laced with noisily over-pressured string noises and whip-like glissandi, compete for space in a saturated musical environment. The message is clear; our drive for "fuel" is crowding the planet. And the psyche.

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It's a delicate musical metaphor that's easy to get wrong. But, Wolfe a 2017 MacArthur Fellow, succeeds in creating both message and music. Julie is a close friend, dating back to the 1990's and my decade as the percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars. I remember countless rehearsals spent trying simply to harness the extraordinary amount of energy she unleashes in every score. With some composers the secret to interpretive success is pruning—see orchestral music from Berlioz to Philip Glass that requires careful sculpting to avoid over-saturation. With Julie's music, the goal is not to prune, but to cultivate focus. This means, explicitly, not backing away from the turbulence of her musical textures (as one might in "pruning-mode") but by leaning in to create shape-shifting sonic masses and intense colors. Think of this music as an English rather than a French garden!

If elegance, not excess, is what you crave, you'll need only to wait for Camille Saint-Saëns popular *Second Piano Concerto*. There is lightness here and grace as pianist and orchestra weave lines around one another. (We are thrilled to welcome Anne Liu, the 2017 Young Artists Competition winner as our soloist!) And though a self-proclaimed lover of "modern" music (think mid-19th century France), Saint-Saëns rarely left an impression of speed or restlessness, which were so often the calling-cards of the proto-revolutionaries of the mid- to late-century. Aside from a short period as a child, Saint-Saëns spent his entire life in Paris—an urbanite just like Julia Wolfe, more than a century earlier. But his was a compact urbanism: consistent and not disruptive; stately not unprincipled. He was the prototypical figure of the *Belle Époque*—refined and decorous—but imagine the world he saw in 1921, the year of his death, and what he may have thought about it. What might he have made of the seeds he planted?

An unintended side theme of this weekend's concert is the surprisingly late death dates of the two male composers. Jean Sibelius, born in Finland in 1865, was practically a contemporary of Saint-Saëns. And like Saint-Saëns he considered a rebellious path only to back away from it and embrace the conservative options of his day. And when you hear his unabashedly beautiful melodies and surging waves of consonant harmonies, you might be surprised that he lived until 1957.

Much of what we know about Sibelius seems contradictory. He has been called, diplomatically, a "keen" smoker and drinker and spoke of the need for alcohol to live life fully. But in fact, alcoholism and smoking nearly

killed him several times. Though he was a Finnish national hero, he was often reclusive, and though he was immensely popular during his lifetime he was often troubled and alone. He expressed his disdain for what he called Richard Wagner's pomposity and vulgarity, but at the same time his overly close relationship with German National Socialists has come under critical scrutiny by some recent scholars.

Perhaps because of these contradictions, Sibelius's *Fifth Symphony* is a masterful, though thoroughly unconventional work, as though he were underlining the estrangement the Finns have always felt relative to "Europe." The problems in interpretation are likewise not to be solved by conventional strategies—so useful in Beethoven—of clarifying the form or elucidating harmonic movement. The performative issues are nearly all in the arena of pacing: in timing the surges of emotion to coincide with changes of texture; of crafting just the right control over moments of surprise and, conversely, stabilizing things when steadiness is in order.

But returning to springtime: what does this music—by the edgy New Yorker, the whiskered Parisian, the hard-drinking Finn—have to do with May in San Diego? It lies in the confidential beauty inherent in unexpected growth. San Diego is a gray-green *xeriscape* for most of the year. So, the sudden appearance of color is truly shocking. The beauty of springtime in San Diego lies in the unexpected "Rivers of Ranunculus," to use a phrase by the poet Wendy Labinger. But its emotional impact comes from the sure knowledge that soon—probably before you read these words—the colors will have faded and the rivers will have run dry again. Likewise, when we hear a light moment in Julia Wolfe (marked, "Like Vivaldi" in the score), the sudden brightening helps us frame the moment. *Fuel* is not all-dystopic metaphor; it can enlighten as well as instruct. And, Saint-Saëns can look up from his desk and through the daily grime of mid-19th century Paris see the sun.

And Sibelius: From the secluded cabin that he called "Ainola," after his wife, Aino, he saw the yearly miracle of spring and summer in Scandinavia. Under nearly 24 hours of sun a day, no place on the planet grows as furiously, as riotously, as the sub-Arctic taiga. It's a place of conflicting impulses and a delicate balance: It is often dark, sometimes muted under heavy snow, often the home of somber thoughts. But when it blooms. Oh, when it blooms...

Steven Schick



News from the Executive Director

Wine Tasting a Delight

Our 18th annual wine tasting took place on Saturday, April 13 at the Mount Soledad home of Elizabeth Taft. Our theme, “The Way Way South,” highlighted wines from South Africa, Uruguay, and Argentina (including Patagonia!) in a blind tasting. This year’s wine moderator, Rich Cook, did a fabulous job of blending education with great fun. The weather was perfect for this outdoor event, and the views from atop Mt. Soledad toward the ocean spectacular. Though we didn’t quite make our hoped-for goal of \$7500 net income, we did bring in almost \$5000 for LJS&C.



Sponsor a Young Artist Award

Next season, our Young Artists Competition turns 60! This program, which has been supported by award sponsors went under a slight revamp this year, increasing the top award amounts to be more in line with like competitions, and creating an entry-level award to encourage younger performers who show promise. We have two award categories that are unclaimed for the 2020 Young Artists Competition: Honorable Mention/Instrumental (\$200) and Most Promising/Instrumental (\$300). Both awards have for many years been supported by memorial funds that are now depleted. If you have interest in becoming an annual supporter of either of these awards, please let me know at dsalisbury@lajollasympphony.com.

Diane Salisbury

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Welcoming our Next Choral Director!



It is with great pleasure that we welcome Ruben Valenzuela as our new Choral Director, beginning in the 2019-2020 Season. Ruben seems as delighted as we are. He recently told me that he is looking forward to the new season and especially to preparing the chorus for our March performance of “War Requiem,” which has long been on his bucket list. The months-long choral director search, which began with a chorus/board/staff focus group last July to define parameters, considered 18 applicants from the San Diego area and beyond. The committee members, who spent many hours reviewing applications, concert and rehearsal videos, programming samples, and attending meetings, are:

- Steve Marsh, Committee Chair (chorus)
- Caitlin Fahey (orchestra)
- Michael Kaehr (chorus)
- Carol Lam (board member and orchestra)
- Carol Manifold (chorus)
- Amee Wood (chorus)

Steven Schick and I served in an ex-officio capacity. Thank you to everyone who helped with this effort. Job well done!

Diane Salisbury

Save the Date

2019 GALA - SEPTEMBER 28
THE WESTGATE HOTEL

Need to contact the LJS&C?

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Diane Salisbury, Executive Director

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