

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The Maestro: How conductor Daniel Stewart left New York's Metropolitan Opera to reshape the Santa Cruz Symphony



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Quick Take

The Santa Cruz Symphony opens its 68th season this weekend, one shaped by the vision of former Metropolitan Opera conductor Daniel Stewart, who has leveraged his international connections and artistic vision to turn the regional symphony into a world-class orchestra.

After conducting at one of the nation's premier venues, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Daniel Stewart made an unconventional choice: He returned to his Bay Area roots to lead the Santa Cruz Symphony.

Since taking the podium in 2013 as conductor and music director, Stewart has reshaped the regional symphony, attracting international recognition and talent and showcasing bold programming. That includes this year. [The symphony's](#) 68th season opens on Saturday with one of the most dazzling works in the orchestral repertoire: Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade."

Born in San Francisco and raised in Rohnert Park, Stewart's early love of music carried him far from his childhood roots. He trained at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and launched a career that has taken him across Europe and the United States, eventually landing at one of the most prestigious podiums in the country: conducting the orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. By then, he had already built an impressive résumé as a violist, composer and conductor. Still, the Met cemented his reputation as a force to watch.

Along the way, music brought him love. Stewart met his wife, violinist In Sun Jang, when they were both fellows with the New World Symphony in Miami. Their partnership, both musical and personal, played a role in his desire to return to the West Coast. "After Miami, Philadelphia, and New York, I was quite determined to find my way back to the Bay Area," he says.

So when the opportunity in Santa Cruz arose, Stewart didn't hesitate. "Rediscovering how deeply I care about the Bay Area and this part of the world was a major pivot in my career," he says. "Dedicating myself to giving back to its diverse musical communities has been the most meaningful decision I've made."

Now based in San Francisco, where his wife is the [first-chair violinist with the San Francisco Symphony](#), Stewart sees his Santa Cruz post as an opportunity to make a lasting impact with one orchestra in one community.

"I immediately fell in love with Santa Cruz," he says.



Daniel Stewart, music director of the Santa Cruz Symphony. Credit: Santa Cruz Symphony

Stewart views programming as a form of storytelling, connecting pieces of music together, selecting masterworks and pairing them with other works to create a cohesive narrative that expands listeners' experience.

"The key to finding the right pairings for a concert is like a great meal," Stewart says. "One course complements the other, and leaves an emotional impression that lasts."

That philosophy has become his signature in Santa Cruz: concerts that feel carefully curated yet pulse with spontaneity. Many of the guest artists who appear with the symphony are friends and colleagues from Stewart's distinguished career. That familiarity translates on stage into a rare chemistry among conductor, orchestra and soloists—performances that feel less like formal recitals and more like thrilling collaborations.

Saturday's season opener, "Scheherazade," is based on the tales from the Arabian Nights. The music paints a sweeping landscape of mystery, danger and triumph. The solo line — spun like a storyteller's thread — is played by the symphony's acclaimed artist-in-residence and concertmaster Nancy Zhou, whose violin becomes by turns seductive, daring and heartbreaking against the orchestra's lush backdrop.

Paired with "Scheherazade" is Edward Elgar's haunting "Cello Concerto in E minor," featuring star soloist Jonah Kim, hailed by The Washington Post as "the next Yo-Yo Ma" for his rich tone and fearless artistry.

If you go
Friday, Oct. 3

7:30 p.m. – Free open rehearsal at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium. A behind-the-scenes look at how a symphony prepares for performance.

Saturday, Oct. 4 – Opening Night at the Civic

- **5:30 p.m. – Street party:** Middle Eastern-inspired food and live music outside the Civic Auditorium.
- **6:30 p.m. – Pre-concert talk** for ticketholders inside the Civic. Professor Don Adkins shares insights and background on the evening's program.
- **7:30 p.m. – Concert 1:** Rimsky-Korsakov's "Scheherazade," Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana," Elgar's "Cello Concerto in E minor," and featuring guest artists Jonah Kim and Nancy Zhou.

Sunday, Oct. 5

2 p.m. – Concert 1 reprise at the Henry J. Mello Center for the Performing Arts in Watsonville.

For tickets, call 831-420-5260 or visit <https://www.santacruztickets.com>

By tapping his global network of artists and holding the symphony to high standards, Stewart has made Santa Cruz an essential stop for top performers. Zhou tours internationally, and Kim balances a schedule that includes appearances with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra. The symphony's shorter season makes it possible for these world-class soloists to commit to Santa Cruz while continuing their international careers.

"The exciting combination of Kim and Zhou for our opening performance is pure fireworks," Stewart says. "For audiences to hear such serious, fiery talent, right here in Santa Cruz, is exceptional."

In March, Stewart is set to create a one-of-a-kind original adaptation of "Amadeus," featuring Charles Pasternak and actors from [Santa Cruz Shakespeare](#), with the symphony performing excerpts from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's most significant works.

Spend an afternoon with the spirited and personable Stewart and one thing becomes clear: He is a connector. He connects audiences to masterpieces and new ideas, musicians to one another, and the community to something bigger than itself.

"I've always considered it a privilege to share musical moments with such a wonderful community," he says. "Moments that bring us into direct contact with our inner selves — full of possibility, wonder, encouragement and faith in one another — as we inhabit these stories in sound together."