

Houston Symphony's 2024-25 season brings mini-festivals, music from a Taylor Swift collaborator

From a celebration of Selena to the return of Andres Orozco-Estrada and the performance of a work from Swift co-writer Bryce Dessner of The National, the season promises musical fireworks.

By **Chris Gray**, *Correspondent*

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 Gift Article



Bryce Dessner, Taylor Swift collaborator and a member the band The National, will have his composition "Mari" performed this season by the Houston Symphony

Mariano Regidor/Redferns/Redferns

Setting aside decades of bitter interurban rivalry, in January the Dallas Morning News declared "the Houston Symphony may be in for a new golden age" under the leadership of Juraj Valcuha, now in his second season as music director. The orchestra's freshly revealed 2024-25 season has plenty more where that came from, promises executive director and CEO John Mangum.

“I’m excited, because I think the Houston Symphony is playing better than ever,” says Mangum, who also holds the Margaret Alkek Williams chair. “The musicians go from strength to strength, and the level of artistry and the kind of projects and the guests that we’re bringing in are so exciting. I feel like every week of the season we’ve gone out of our way to make sure that whatever we’re putting on the stage is as close to peak experiences we can get it.”

Valçuha will command the Jones Hall podium for 11 total appearances next season, including concert series based around Italian opera and Bartòk’s “Duke Bluebeard’s Castle”; the Houston return of Yo-Yo Ma in Dvořák’s Cello Concerto; and Gustav Mahler’s season-closing, nature-besotted Symphony No. 3. Most of the conductor’s appearances, however, are for thematically linked back-to-back weekend series that function as mini-festivals. (This month’s “Triumph & Tragedy,” including Mahler’s Symphony No. 6 and Beethoven’s “Eroica” symphony, is a more immediate example.)



Pink Martini, featuring Thomas Lauderdale and China Forbes, returns to Houston as part of the Houston Symphony season.

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Wasting no time, October's "Bohemian Rhapsody" mini-festival devotes the season's opening two weekends to the music of Slovakian native Valçuha's Central European homeland. Leading with Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 ("From the New World") and the same composer's Violin Concerto, starring soloist James Ehnes, the extended program will also introduce Houston audiences to more obscure corners of the Bohemian repertoire such as Bohuslav Martinů's Czech Rhapsody, sinfoniettas by Leoš Janáček and early 20th-century female composer Vítěslava Kaprálová, and American composer Bryce Dessner's Dvořák and Mahler-influenced "Mari."

On that note, the latter will surely mark the orchestra's debut performance of a work by a member of indie-rock veterans The National — and, lest we forget, one of Taylor Swift's "Evermore" and "Folklore" collaborators.

"That's what those festivals do — they give us a chance to really explore," says Mangum. "We can take some central things that are really familiar to audiences, whether it's artists or repertoire; and then explore, around those, all kinds of exciting things that are either seldom heard in concert or are really famous but also seldom heard in concert."



The same holds for the “Vienna Calling” festival, set for Thanksgiving weekend and Dec. 7-8. Primed by years of conductor Carlos Kleiber’s televised New Year’s Day appearances with the Vienna Philharmonic, audiences may think they know the Strauss family, argues Mangum, but “even though it’s incredibly famous music, it’s very seldom done with the proper rehearsal and preparation by a major orchestra.”

Similarly, the “Fairytale” festival in March 2025 will feature, among other works, Prokofiev’s “Cinderella” suite; the world premiere of Rice University professor Karim al-Zand’s “Al-Jazari’s Ingenious Clocks”; and Alexander Zemlinsky’s 1905 symphonic poem “The Mermaid,” a pivotal piece in Valçuha’s path to Houston.

“The first time I heard Juraj conduct, it was doing Zemlinsky’s ‘The Mermaid,’” Mangum says. “It got me excited enough about him to the point where we’re here, so I hope that enthusiasm and his real affinity for that repertoire comes across clearly to the audience.”

While Valçuha is away, leading the orchestra will be a succession of first-time guest conductors such as Sir Donald Runnicles, Tabita Berglund, Domingo Hindoyan, and Dalia Stasevska; as well as return engagements by world-renowned soloists Daniil Trifonov, Yefim Bronfman, Kirill Gerstein, and Leila Josefowicz, among others. Several orchestra principals, including horn William VerMeulen, concertmaster Yoonshin Song, violist Joan DerHovsepian, and cellist Brinton Averil Smith, will also enjoy a turn in the spotlight.

Also returning, to a hero’s welcome, are beloved music director emeritus Andres Orozco-Estrada, leading Richard Strauss’ “Also sprach Zarathustra” in March alongside soloist Hilary Hahn in Brahms’ Violin Concerto; and Christoph Eschenbach, who will conduct Anton Bruckner’s Symphony No. 4 in January as part of an intercontinental 85th birthday celebration.



Michael Tilson Thomas returns as a special guest for the next season announced by the Houston Symphony.
Jana Asenbrennerova/Special to The Chronicle

And on Nov. 14, Michael Tilson Thomas, another distinguished maestro with substantial ties to the orchestra, will conduct a one-off performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as part of his 80th birthday festivities.

"It's really special, because there are several people who came out of the New World Symphony who are part of the Houston Symphony," says Mangum, "and of course I had the great privilege to work with Michael in San Francisco about a decade and a half ago."

All that, and we still haven't gotten to the Pops portion yet. (Or, for that matter, the four concerts of the PNC Bank Family Series, including "Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Missing Maestro.") The season's other notable milestone is longtime local favorite Pink Martini's January return as part of the adventurous Oregon lounge-pop ensemble's 30th anniversary season. Another highlight is an encore visit by musically minded circus troupe Cirque de la Symphonie, this time in a rock-themed production based on the music of Styx, Heart, the Eagles and more.



The music of Duke Ellington and others from the Cotton Club era will be celebrated by the Houston Symphony this season.

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Elsewhere, look for tributes to the music of the Cotton Club era (Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, etc.), the Bee Gees, Motown, Selena, James Bond films, and iconic Broadway women; as well as principal Pops conductor Steven Reineke returning to conduct the Very Merry Pops holiday show. Perhaps the hottest ticket of all in recent seasons, the orchestra's live film-score series will continue with "The Nightmare Before Christmas" for a second straight year, plus "The Empire Strikes Back," "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban" and, says Manaum, perhaps more on the way.

Speaking of films, the season doesn't so much end as transition to the orchestra's TBD summer 2025 programming, but not before Reineke's Pops finale explores the rich artistic relationship between John Williams and Steven Spielberg. Reflecting on the epic season to come, Mangum is awed not just by the sheer amount of music the orchestra has on tap, but by the players' remarkable versatility.

"They can play Bach as well as they can play the most intricate contemporary pieces," he says. "They can play a film score as beautifully as they play Beethoven. They can do jazz ... any style you throw at 'em, they just bring it off at the absolute highest level."