



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Santa Rosa Symphony Welcomes Renowned Cellist and Conductor Paul Watkins for Mendelssohn's *Italian* Symphony

January 10, 11 & 12, 2026, Weill Hall, Green Music Center

(Santa Rosa, Calif.) – Join the Santa Rosa Symphony January 10, 11 & 12, 2026, for Mendelssohn's *Italian* Symphony at Weill Hall, Green Music Center. The program features world-renowned cellist and conductor Paul Watkins in a dual role, leading the orchestra as well as performing Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 2 in D major. The program also includes Caroline Shaw's *Entr'acte* and Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 4, *Italian*.

Widely recognized for his decade-long tenure with the Emerson String Quartet and performances with major orchestras around the world, including the BBC Symphony, Paul Watkins has built a distinguished career as both soloist and conductor. He has led orchestras such as the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, Hong Kong Philharmonic, and Colorado Symphony, and for this concert, he appears in both capacities—conducting the Symphony and performing one of the most beloved works in the cello repertoire: Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 2 in D major.

Haydn composed the concerto during his years at the Esterházy court, famously writing, "In Eszterháza I was forced to become original." That creative spark, paired with the influence of virtuoso cellist Anton Kraft, resulted in a lyrical and technically dazzling concerto that often soars into the cello's upper register, showcasing the instrument's expressive brilliance.

The concert also features Felix Mendelssohn's *Italian* Symphony, inspired by the composer's ten-month journey through Italy. Mendelssohn captured his experiences in music, creating a work full of vibrant imagery. The first three movements evoke the bright, sunlit landscapes of Italy, while the final movement draws on Italian dance forms, reimagining the lively Saltarello and the spirited Neapolitan Tarantella.

Rounding out the program is *Entr'acte* for String Orchestra by Caroline Shaw, recipient of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Music. Shaw has collaborated with renowned artists, including Renée Fleming and Yo-Yo Ma. The piece was inspired by the Brentano Quartet's performance of Haydn's String Quartet Op. 77, No. 2, particularly the "spare and soulful shift to the D-flat major trio in the minuet." Shaw describes it as "music that suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, technicolor transition."

"Paul Watkins is one of the truly exceptional musicians of our time, with an incredible career that includes his time as the cellist for the legendary Emerson String Quartet. It's truly an honor to be able to feature him on a program that highlights his work as both soloist and conductor, bringing thrilling interpretations of Haydn and Mendelssohn."

- **Francesco Lecce-Chong**, Music Director and Conductor

BIOGRAPHIES:

Paul Watkins, conductor and cello

Acclaimed for his inspirational performances and eloquent musicianship, Paul Watkins enjoys a distinguished career as concerto soloist, chamber musician and conductor. He is the Artistic Director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival in Detroit (since 2014), the cellist of the Emerson String Quartet (2013-2023) and Visiting Professor of Cello at Yale School of Music (since 2018). He took first prize in the 2002 Leeds Conducting Competition and has held the positions of Music Director of the English Chamber Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor of the Ulster Orchestra.

Watkins has given regular concerto performances with the major British orchestras, including at the BBC Proms, where he most recently performed with the BBC Symphony and Thomas Ades in Lutoslawski's cello concerto, and with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in the world premiere of the cello concerto composed for him by his brother, Huw Watkins. He has performed with prestigious orchestras across the globe including the Netherlands Philharmonic, Melbourne Symphony and Queensland Orchestras, the Konzerthausorchester Berlin, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Colorado Symphony, Norwegian Radio Orchestra, Antwerp Symphony, and the Orchestra Nazionale Sinfonica della RAI Torino, under the baton of renowned conductors including Paavo Berglund, Leonard Slatkin, Sakari Oramo, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Mark Elder, Richard Hickox, Sir Andrew Davis, and Sir Charles Mackerras. He premiered (and was the dedicatee of) Mark-Anthony Turnage's new concerto with the Antwerp Symphony and Edo de Waart, the Tampere Philharmonic Orchestra and Hannu Lintu, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Vasily Petrenko, and the Gewandhausorchester Leipzig and Andris Nelsons. Highlights of the 23/24 season include Tippett's Triple Concerto with the Halle orchestra and Shostakovich's first concerto with the Aalborg Symphony.

A dedicated chamber musician, Watkins was a member of the Nash Ensemble from 1997 until 2013, and the Emerson String Quartet from 2013 until 2023. With the Quartet he travelled extensively, performing at major international festivals including Tanglewood, Aspen, Ravinia, Edinburgh, Berlin and Evian and collaborated with distinguished artists such as Emanuel Ax, Yefim Bronfman, Renee Fleming and Evgeny Kissin. After 44 successful seasons, the Quartet decided to retire, and undertook an extensive series of farewell tours, culminating in their final performances in New York Lincoln Center in October 2023, with the concerts filmed for a documentary by acclaimed filmmaker Tristan Cook, and the release of their final recording of Berg, Chausson, Schoenberg and Hindemith with prestigious guests soprano Barbara Hannigan and pianist Bertrand Chamayou.

Watkins has conducted all the major British orchestras, and a wide range of international orchestras including the Kristiansand Symphony, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, Vienna Chamber Orchestra, Prague Symphony, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Tampere Philharmonic, Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic and the Melbourne Symphony, Queensland and Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestras. In 2006 he made his opera debut conducting a critically praised new production of Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* for Opera North.

Recent highlights include his conducting debuts with the Minnesota Orchestra and Detroit Symphony, as well as concerto appearances with the BBC Symphony under Semyon Bychkov and Sir Andrew Davis, the City of Birmingham Symphony under Alexander Vedernikov, and the European Union Youth Orchestra under the baton of Bernard Haitink, in a tour featuring performances at the Grafenegg Festival and Amsterdam's Concertgebouw. Last season also saw appearances at the Sante Fe Chamber Music Festival and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

His extensive discography as a cellist includes a wide range of repertoire for Chandos Records, including Britten's Cello Symphony, the concertos of Delius, Elgar, Finzi, Lutoslawski, Walton, Tobias Picker and Cyril Scott, and recitals of Mendelssohn, Martinu, and 20th century British and American music for cello and piano with Huw Watkins. He has recorded the Britten solo cello suites and twentieth century British repertoire for Nimbus, Takemitsu's *Orion* and *Pleiades* for BIS Records, and as a conductor, music by

Mozart, Gliere, Röntgen, and a Grammy® nominated pairing of the Berg and Britten violin concertos with Daniel Hope.

Watkins plays on a cello made by Domenico Montagnana and Matteo Goffriller in Venice, c.1730.

PROGRAM AT A GLANCE:

CAROLINE SHAW: *Entr'acte* for String Orchestra

FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN: Concerto No. 2 in D major for Cello and Orchestra, Hob. VII:2

FELIX MENDELSSOHN: Symphony No. 4 in A major, Opus 90, *Italian*

High-res photos and interview opportunities available: Paul Watkins.

CONCERT ENHANCEMENTS:

Concert Program books: Available at all Classical Series concerts.

Concert Program notes: These can be read on the [Digital Program Books & Notes](#) page.

Pre-concert talk: Conductor and cellist Paul Watkins provides a 30-minute pre-concert talk one hour prior to the performances.

SPONSORS:

Classical Concert Series underwritten by **Anderman Family Foundation**

Sponsored by **Sam Guerrero, in memory of Ava Guerrero**

Paul Watkins sponsored by **Lynn & Stephen Olsen**

Shaw: *Entr'acte* for String Orchestra sponsored by **The E. Nakamichi Foundation**

Discovery Rehearsal Series sponsored by **The Stare Foundation and Lee & Dave Stare of Dry Creek Vineyard**

Pre-Concert Talk sponsored by **Jamei Haswell & Mack Schwing**

Season Media Sponsor: ***The Press Democrat***

AT A GLANCE / CALENDAR LISTINGS:

WHO: [Santa Rosa Symphony](#)

WHAT: [Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony](#)

WHERE: Weill Hall, Green Music Center, Sonoma State University

WHEN:

Saturday, January 10, 2026, at 2:00 pm – Discovery Open Rehearsal (no Pre-concert talk)

Saturday, January 10, 2026, at 7:30 pm (Doors at 6:00 pm, Pre-concert Talk 6:30 pm - 7:00 pm)

Sunday, January 11, 2026, at 3:00 pm (Doors at 1:30 pm, Pre-concert Talk 2:00 pm - 2:30 pm)

Monday, January 12, 2026, at 7:30 pm (Doors at 6:00 pm, Pre-concert Talk 6:30 pm - 7:00 pm)

TICKET PRICES:

\$20 / adult; \$10 / youth (7-17) for Discovery Open Rehearsal

\$34-\$110 for Classical Series performances

Youths 7-17 may receive one complimentary ticket with every paid adult. Request tickets through Patron Services at (707) 546-8742. Classical Series concerts only

\$10 student rush tickets for students with a valid student ID. Available at the door only

HOW TO PURCHASE TICKETS:

srsymphony.org or (707) 546-8742 or in person: 50 Santa Rosa Ave, 1st Floor, Santa Rosa CA. (Weekdays 9:00 am – 5:00 pm; 10:30 am – 5:00 pm on Wednesday; closed Saturday & Sunday.)

ABOUT SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

Santa Rosa Symphony (SRS), the Resident Orchestra at Green Music Center, is the third-oldest professional orchestra in California and the largest regional symphony north of Los Angeles. Francesco

Lecce-Chong began his tenure in 2018 as the Symphony's fifth Music Director in its 98 years. J. Andrew Bradford joined SRS as President and CEO in 2023.

SRS performances include 21 Classical Series concerts presented over seven concert weekends, six Discovery Rehearsals, a three-concert Family Series, a four-concert Symphony Pops Series, and special events.

The Symphony is recognized as having one of California's most comprehensive music education programs, serving nearly 20,000 youth annually. Collaborations with schools and organizations across Sonoma County have gained the Santa Rosa Symphony national attention and support.

Awards include a League of American Orchestras' MetLife Award for Community Engagement and a first-place award for adventurous programming in the 2012-2013 season from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). In 2022, SRS, in conjunction with Delos Productions, released its first commercial label recording, Cello Concerto & Other Works, featuring works by composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

The Santa Rosa Symphony is committed to the core values of artistic excellence, innovative programming, comprehensive music education, and community service.

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