

CONTACT: Marie Songco-Torres
(949) 553-2422, ext. 230
marie@philharmonicsociety.org

Rosiana Falzon
(949) 553-2422, ext. 105
rosiana@philharmonicsociety.org

**PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY OF ORANGE COUNTY'S 2026 GALA
FEATURING AUDRA MCDONALD RAISES \$368,000 FOR ARTISTIC
AND YOUTH MUSIC EDUCATION PROGRAMS**



Audra McDonald (Photo: Paul Cressey)

(IRVINE, CA, APRIL 30, 2026)—The Philharmonic Society of Orange County hosted its **2026 Gala, *Illuminating Dreams Through Music***, featuring a private performance by **Audra McDonald** on Friday, April 24, 2026, at Newport Beach County Club. Raising \$368,000, proceeds from the evening benefit the Philharmonic Society's artistic and youth programs, including its Strike Up The Band program, which grants musical instruments and vital teaching materials to school music programs. This year, guests were also invited to support the Philharmonic Society's Fund-A-Bus program, which provides funding for

student transportation to live music experiences. The spectacular evening was made possible by the vision and dedication of Gala Co-chairs **Deirdre Smith** and **Marlene Nielsen**. Gala Honorary Committee members included: Kay Burra, Lauren and Cor Claus, Margaret M. Gates, Elizabeth Henry and Bruce Ibbetson, Kari Kerr, Elaine and Carl Neuss, Mirella Reznic, Marcia Kay and Ronald Radelet, Karen and Philip Ridout, Gail and Robert Sebring, Ruth and David Seigle, and Linda Silverman and Ercil Brown.



Decor (Photo: Paul Cressey)



Marlene Nielsen, Tommy Phillips, Deirdre Smith
(Photo: Drew Kelley)

EVENING HIGHLIGHTS:

Upon arriving, guests entered the venue on a gold carpet softly illuminated by candlelight, reflective of the evening’s theme, *Illuminating Dreams Through Music*. Valet parking for the evening was generously sponsored by **Farmers & Merchants Bank**. After stopping for a quick photo, attendees were invited up to the ballroom level, where they were greeted by the enchanting sounds of a string quartet from the Philharmonic Society’s Orange County Youth Symphony. Guests mingled at the cocktail reception, where they enjoyed hors d’oeuvres and the evening’s signature drinks: the “Gypsy Rose Cosmo,” a classic cosmopolitan in honor of Audra McDonald’s role as Rose in the classic Broadway musical *Gypsy*, and the “Luminous Libation,” an elegant vodka martini. At the Fund-A-Bus “Illumination Tree,” guests made gifts toward student transportation to live musical experiences and were invited to place their own music note ornament on the tree,

symbolizing how their generosity is lighting the path for children across Orange County to experience the joy of live music. Guests were then invited into the main ballroom, where dinner service began with the “Heirloom Beet & Goat Cheese Salad,” delicately curated with frisée, micro greens, crushed pistachio, and a truffle white balsamic. For the main course, guests enjoyed the “Pan Seared Petite Filet Mignon & Roasted Chilean Sea Bass,” served alongside roasted vegetables and a bed of mashed potatoes, topped with micro greens.

Following dinner was the live auction, hosted by auctioneer **Vincent Zapien**. Guests bid on several luxury experiences, including an **In-home Japanese Culinary Experience** with a 16-course Chef’s Table Omakase, including 8 paired cocktails crafted to match every second course; a **5-night trip to Mozart’s Austria**, complete with a VIP Golden Dinner & Concert Experience at Fortress Hohensalzburg, a hands-on Mozartkugel chocolate workshop, and a classical music concert in Mozart’s first Vienna apartment; and a breathtaking **9-Day Big Five Luxury African Safari** by Ubuntu Travel Group, offering unforgettable wildlife encounters, stays at both the Tuningi Safari Lodge in Madikwe and the Marataba Safari Lodge in Marakele, sightings of the Big Five (lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, and buffaloes), spa and wellness treatments at both safari lodges, complimentary Ubuntu Travel apparel, and all ground transfers with a private driver and guide. The auction also included a surprise opportunity to attend **Carnegie Hall’s “Concert of the Century,”** which features Carnegie Hall all-stars Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Renée Fleming, Emanuel Ax, Lang Lang, Daniil Trifonov, and Audra McDonald, among others. The package also includes admission to a gala dinner where attendees will dine with the performing artists, in addition to a two-night stay at the iconic Waldorf Astoria.

The Fund a Need portion of the evening was introduced by student speaker, Orange County Youth Symphony alumnus and former concertmaster, **Candice Lee**. Lee, now a freshman at UCLA’s Herp Alpert School of Music, underscored the transformative power that music education has had in her life. Proceeds from this portion of the evening benefited the Philharmonic Society’s Strike Up The Band program, an initiative dedicated to enriching

school music programs throughout Orange County through the granting of musical instruments and teaching materials. Since its inception in 2013, Strike Up The Band has provided over \$730,000 in instruments, teaching materials, and supplies to 88 schools across Orange County, including 57 Title I schools (schools where at least 40% of students come from low-income families).

Following the auction came the highly anticipated, exclusive private performance by Emmy, Grammy, and six-time Tony-winner, **Audra McDonald**. The most decorated performer in Tony history, McDonald delivered an unforgettable performance alongside pianist and music director, **Andy Einhorn**. McDonald spoke of the importance of the evening, remarking that the arts is the “food for our lives”. Highlights from her setlist included “Pure Imagination,” “I Could Have Danced All Night,” and an encore which was a pastiche of the songs “Get Happy” and “Happy Days are Here Again,” sung as a duet with Einhorn. McDonald dedicated her performance of “Fascinating Rhythm” to **Michael Tilson Thomas**, who passed in his San Francisco home this past Wednesday, April 22, 2026. McDonald was a longtime collaborator of MTT’s, who was Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, as well as Co-Founder and Artistic Director of the New World Symphony. The celebration ended with guests enjoying a dessert buffet sponsored by **American Business Bank**, and mingling with a dream inspired set provided by jazz guitarist, **Brian Barany**.

ON THE SCENE:

Gala attendees included: Elizabeth and Bart Asner, Linda Silverman and Ercil Brown, Lauren and Cor Claus, Elizabeth Henry and Bruce Ibbetson, Hans and Valerie Imhof, Tehmina Jesrai, Maria Kelly, Donna L. Kendall, Kari Kerr, Joone Kim-Lopez, Carolyn and Bill Klein, Elaine and Carl Neuss, Marlene and Chris Nielsen, Marcia Kay and Ronald Radelet, Mirella Reznic, Stephanie Rogers, Gail and Robert Sebring, Anne and Danny Shih, June Shillman, Dierdre and Douglas Smith, Tenley Zinke and guests from the City of Irvine, among others.

ABOUT THE PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY OF ORANGE COUNTY:

Founded in 1954 as Orange County's first music organization, the Philharmonic Society of Orange County presents national and international performances of the highest quality and provides dynamic and innovative music education programs for individuals of all ages to enhance the lives of Orange County audiences through music.

Since its inception, the Philharmonic Society has evolved and grown with the county's changing landscape, presenting artists and orchestras who set the standard for artistic achievement from Itzhak Perlman, Gustavo Dudamel, Yo-Yo Ma, and Renée Fleming to the Berlin Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and many others. In addition, the Philharmonic Society celebrates multi-disciplinary performances under its Eclectic Orange brand and embraces music from a wide range of countries with its World Music performances. Its celebrated concerts introduce children to classical music with creative and inspiring performances, instilling music appreciation for future generations.

The Philharmonic Society's nationally recognized Youth Music Education Programs, offered free of charge, engage more than 80,000 students annually through curriculum-based music education programs that aim to inspire, expand imaginations, and encourage learning at all levels. These programs are made possible by the Committees of the Philharmonic Society comprised of nearly 450 volunteer members who provide more than 50,000 hours of in-kind service each year. As a key youth program, the exceptional Orange County Youth Symphony and String Ensemble provide top-tier training to the area's most talented young musicians through multi-level ensemble instruction, leadership training, touring opportunities, challenging professional repertoire, and performances in world-class venues. The Philharmonic Society also promotes life-long learning, connecting with colleges and universities to conduct masterclasses and workshops and providing pre-concert lectures to introduce audiences to program selections.