Interview with Michael Nowak

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Michael Nowak has been the conductor of the San Luis Obispo Symphony since 1984. He is also very active in the film recording industry as both a violist and conductor. Recently he has conducted the scores for Lars and the Real Girl, Bobby, King Kong, and The Kite Runner.

Moebius: How did you initially become interested in music?

MN: I was in third grade at public school in Warwick, Rhode Island. They were painting our classroom, so my class moved to the auditorium. Other students were rehearsing a show there, and I heard a 6th grader playing the violin. I thought it was just the greatest, most amazing sound. I knew that’s what I wanted to do. I went home and asked my parents if I could have a violin. They said no, that I was too young. But the next year, in fourth grade, you could take violin through the school. So I got my violin, started playing, and I made a good sound right away. My folks even liked it. Once or twice a week the music teacher came to our school. I knew from that time that I wanted to play music.

Moebius: What were your early experiences with music like?

MN: They were great. I played with the Rhode Island Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, the student branch of the Rhode Island Philharmonic. It was a terrific group. Actually, when the SLO Symphony and SLO Youth Symphony were putting together their merger a few years ago, I said to them, call Rhode Island. They can tell you how to do it. I also played the clarinet and tuba.

Moebius: Why did you want to learn different instruments?

MN: I knew early on that I was interested in composition and conducting, and I wanted to get a sense of the different instruments. I think that’s really important for conductors. A lot of conductors are pianists, or if they play an orchestral instrument, they give it up to focus on conducting. I could never do that. For me, conducting isn’t enough; I have to play too. It helps you keep in touch with the orchestra. It’s important to understand the different technical challenges of the instruments in an orchestra. For example, you can tell the strings exactly what part of the bow to play in to get the right sound. Or you understand if the winds have to breathe at certain points in the music.
Moebius: It's always helpful in rehearsals when you borrow my viola and show us how to play something. Not all conductors can do that. Did you start conducting at a young age?

MN: Yes, in high school I sometimes filled in for the regular conductor. I loved all the sounds the orchestra could make. I was also composing music at the time and getting a sense of the orchestra that way.

Moebius: Where did you attend college?

MN: I spent a year at Boston University doing academic classes and music classes. Then I transferred to Indiana University at Bloomington. When I got there, I thought to myself, this is it: it’s nirvana. The music school there is really like a conservatory; it’s that good. It’s a very large program—500-plus music majors, 6-8 orchestras—so it’s sometimes called a “music factory.” But that’s not true. I saw it as an amazing concentration of driven, talented, just ridiculously talented musicians. And out of those 500 majors, you’d know maybe 375 of them. There was always something going on, some opportunity to perform: operas, ballets, all the symphonic and chamber music repertoire.

Moebius: It was at Indiana that you switched from violin to viola. How did that happen?

MN: William Primrose [legendary Scottish viola virtuoso, who in the 20th century, almost single-handedly made the viola into a seriously regarded solo instrument]. I attended one of his master classes, and I was convinced to take up the viola. I think if he didn't play the viola, but made geodesic domes, I would have taken up geodesic-dome making as my career. He was that impressive, everything about him—his virtuosity, his teaching, his personality—a gifted, inspiring person all around. As a teacher, he was both demanding and encouraging.

Moebius: That’s a hard line to walk as a teacher.

MN: He did it brilliantly.

Moebius: You also studied conducting at Indiana?

MN: Well, there was a just a graduate program in conducting, but as an undergraduate I wanted to conduct. So I formed a chamber orchestra and got experience from that. The school wasn’t too happy about it, because it wasn’t authorized as part of the program. They already had conducting classes. But I did it anyway.

Moebius: Currently, you conduct both the SLO Symphony, a community orchestra composed of people like me, who have “day jobs” but still play, and also professional studio orchestras. What are the differences?

MN: The challenge with the SLO Symphony is to try to make us sound like a professional orchestra in a pretty short time. I mean, we had our first rehearsal for the next
concert last night. If we were a professional orchestra, we would have gotten about 85-90 percent of the music on the first read-through. But we were struggling with some of it.

Moebius: Yeah we were!

MN: But with a few weeks of work it comes together. After our last concert, someone told me “It was like I’d been to a hear a professional orchestra.” Another thing, with professional musicians, they may be less willing to experiment, to try things out. They’ll say, “I’ve played this Beethoven Symphony twenty times, I know how it goes.” With the SLO Symphony, there’s room to create our own interpretation, to play around. I really think that the best conductors are the ones who let players be free to create their own interpretations.

Moebius: What else do you think makes a good conductor?

MN: Listening—you have to be able to listen to all parts of the orchestra equally. Also, clarity; clarity is very important to me. What I do with my hands, my face, my body, it’s picked up on by the entire orchestra. They need perfectly clear signals to know when to play and how to play. You’ve got people playing the same piece of music who are sitting a hundred feet away from each other. I have to bring them together. Distance is a real challenge. The strings are closer to me, the winds farther away. The winds may be late because of that. You know, David, after you guys [the strings] went home last night, and we rehearsed the wind piece [Stravinsky’s Symphonies of Wind Instruments], I moved closer to them and it was amazing. I could hear them, all of them. And they could see me, the way the strings always do. It’s all about overcoming distance. Performing with soloists is also difficult. If everyone in the orchestra could be right next to the soloist and hear them like I do, everything would be fine. But they can’t, because of the physical distance. So I have to bring them together. Also, studying scores—you have to be familiar with a composer’s whole body of work to do it justice. Basically, it’s like being the director of a play—I have to make sure that by the time of the concert it’s all in place and ready to go.

Moebius: That’s an interesting comparison. People have so many different ways of explaining how they see music performance and why they do it. For some, it’s about bringing to life a composer’s vision. For others, it’s about personal expression. Or it’s about giving pleasure to the audience, a sort of gift to the community. Or it’s done for the pleasure of ensemble performance. Do you see performance as essentially dramatic?

MN: For me, it’s all those things you mentioned, but yes, a concert is a lot like a play or an opera: here comes the leading man, now it’s time for the heroine, here’s the chorus, someone get killed, others get married—uh oh, there’s a plot twist! It’s the same thing in a concert—the piece starts quietly, then, what’s that? A clarinet solo. Then the strings take over, then a fast exciting section with the winds, then it all stops and there’s silence, and then it builds to the finale. It’s storytelling. It’s drama.
Moebius: Some worry that classical music may be dying out in our culture. Orchestras folding, programs getting cut, audiences for classical music being mostly older. Where do you weigh in on those concerns?

MN: Well, people always worry that audiences for classical concerts are mostly older. Our audiences for the SLO Symphony are mostly older. I would love to see more young people, more Cal Poly students, at the performances. But for us, there’s been a surge of interest since we started the “no ties allowed” dress rehearsals and the music education programs.

Moebius: I agree, the Saturday dress rehearsals attract a younger crowd. But our audience does seem to be older.

MN: It does. But you don’t see that in larger cities, where you have lots of young professionals, artists, and music students going to concerts. I have a theory about this—it’s not tested, but I think it might have some truth to it. You’re an English teacher; maybe you’ll know what I mean. I think music is like reading. You read or listen to what you’re ready for, when you’re ready for it. It speaks to you in some way, depending on where you are in life. For me, when I moved to California, I read a Steinbeck novel and said, “Ok, this is about California, I get it. I’ve been to Monterey, I’ve seen Cannery Row, this book makes sense to me.” And then I read all of Steinbeck’s works. I did the same thing with Hermann Hesse, and Dickens. Didn’t make it all the way through Dickens, though.

Moebius: Neither did I, and I have a Ph.D. in Victorian Literature!

MN: Well get with it, Dave! My point is that I think you find certain things—books, music, art, whatever—when you’re ready for them. When you’re younger, with music, maybe it’s disco, or pop music, or rap, but when you’re older, maybe you’re ready for something deeper, more truthful: the enduring classics. Maybe that’s why the audiences for classical music concerts are older.

Moebius: Perhaps older folks become more reflective and thoughtful. Less obsessed with the rat race and “getting on,” they’re ready to respond to the emotional complexity of classical music.

MN: Yes, or maybe, when you’re younger, you just want to live your own way in the world, find out who you are. When you’re older, you’ve done all that. You can start thinking of the big picture and you can put it all in perspective, and you develop an ear for classical music. When I was younger, I was afraid to do Beethoven. I was afraid of getting it wrong. But now I’m fifty-seven, the same age Beethoven was when he died. I imagine I’ve had similar life experiences as him. So I feel like I have the perspective and the experience to do justice to his music. It’s amazing to me that geniuses like Beethoven could express themselves so fully with the limited musical calligraphy available. Like with the Sibelius [violin concerto] we played last night. Your [viola] solo is in two but the violin soloist is
playing in three, but later he’s in two and you’re in three… I have to show you…

[At this point Mike excitedly hunted down the score of the Sibelius Violin Concerto to show me what he meant. In layman’s terms, Sibelius had a “square peg” musical idea that he had to fit in the “round hole” of musical notation.]

MN: I think it’s just so amazing… Sibelius and every composer… they know what they want, but they have to fit it into the limited notation of music and what we can play. What I showed you, this is an example. Sibelius wanted it to sound a certain way; he imagined it that way, but couldn’t decide how to write that out. So he wrote it both ways.

Moebius: Who do you think is doing a lot these days to keep classical music alive?

MN: I’d say the people who are doing crossover work. In the old days, you were one kind of musician: jazz, rock, classical, pop. These days the handcuffs are loosened, especially for classical musicians, to crossover into other styles. You’re freed up. You don’t have to play perfectly in time with everyone else as part of a 16-person section, playing the conductor’s interpretation. Classical musicians are branching out and doing some really interesting things: like Yo-Yo Ma with the Silk Road Project, or Richard Todd (who plays jazz french horn), or locally, the violinist Giles Apap does some great stuff. He’ll just feel like playing a concert and go play one in a barn. Local violinist Brynn Albanese is a perfect example—she’s classically trained, and she’s played with major orchestras back East and in Europe, and now she’s in the group Café Musique playing folk, gypsy, and the old standards—and they sound great.

Moebius: I bought Café Musique’s CD. They do the best version of Czardas [a classical, gypsy-influenced violin piece] I’ve ever heard.

MN: That’s what I mean. Someone who’s never heard “Czardas” might buy their CD, thinking it’s popular, but then they get Brynn playing “Czardas.” These crossover guys are expanding the audience, reaching out to new listeners, giving them more options in all the styles of music. Popular musicians have been doing this for a long time: The Beatles switching gears, Emerson Lake and Powell, Joni Mitchell playing jazz in the ’70s. I was in the audience for her “Shadows and Light” concert in Santa Barbara, and I thought it was just great that she was branching out in to jazz.

Moebius: What other trends have you noticed in classical music?

MN: For a long time in the ’60s and ’70s, I thought it was really going downhill. All the new compositions were so intellectual. There was no emotional content, and it was hard for audiences to connect or even want to listen. I was a composition student then, so I was in the middle of it. There were some composers, like Norman Dello Joio, who weren’t part of that trend. But most of the new music was so aleatoric, so random… you’d get
a new piece, and if a green flashlight lit up, you play this section. If it was red, play this other section. Just crazy stuff. People started to think, “there’s no more good classical music.” And then there was a shift—back to basics—and the music got really simple. Just two notes repeated or the same phrase played over in slightly different ways. Guys like John Adams, Terry Reilly, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass were doing this. It was a weird shift—the new music being written went from totally chaotic to extremely structured and minimalist. I think this had to be a response to World War II. How do you write music in the wake of that violence and destruction? Do you reflect that or try to make sense of the world in spite of it? These days there seems to be a lot of variety. Composers like Craig Russell [Cal Poly Music Professor] are writing music from the heart that’s listenable but still new and exciting.

Moebius: What do you think about programming new music versus the old standbys, the “war-horses” of the repertoire that everyone knows? Do the war-horses “dumb down” the concert experience?

MN: Well, several years ago in SLO I programmed the Berg Violin Concerto. I got nasty letters from the audience. A lot of them hated it. They didn’t want to hear it. Why? Because it’s difficult to listen to. I still get kidded about that. I think a lot of people go to concerts for relief. The rest of the world is difficult—wars, violence, death, taxes. People’s lives are complicated and stressful, so they come to concerts hoping to have their souls replenished, their chakras realigned. The war-horses, the Old Masters, they can do that. They’re familiar, like old friends or telling family stories. I used to think that programming them was like “dumbing down,” but I don’t think that way any more. There’s a reason the old guys get played so often. It’s like the top ten on the radio—those songs are popular because they’re speaking to people right now. The Old Masters speak to people. They always have. There’s something true and authentic about them, and I think people come to concerts because music represents truth. Music is not opinion; it’s purity. It’s minus bullshit. People today are looking for something real, something not doctored. They get that at a concert. So I think of my job as helping them find that, like the curator of a museum. I guide the audience through the different rooms: here’s Bach, here’s Mozart, Beethoven… but you can’t spend all day in one room. When thinking about what to program, I also try to give players in the orchestra a chance to shine. I’ll think, here’s a piece where Virginia [SLO Symphony principal clarinetist Virginia Wright] can play a nice solo, or the brass have a good part on this, or the strings will enjoy playing this.

Moebius: Are there any pieces you would never program?

MN: The Franck Symphony in D minor. It’s just one theme for an entire 45 minutes, played over and over. You don’t need that. I don’t program a lot of the Russian masters [Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ippolitov-Ivanov, Mussorgsky]. Their music gets repetitive.
Moebius: I remember that when I joined the orchestra, you told me you didn’t program the Tchaikovsky symphonies, which was surprising because they’re such crowd pleasers.

MN: They’re repetitive, and the brass usually covers the strings. I love Tchaikovsky when he draws on Russian themes—like in the last movement of the Serenade for strings, or the “Little Russian” Symphony—or in his miniatures—like the dances from The Nutcracker, they’re just perfect.

Moebius: Or the Andante Cantabile from his String Quartet.

MN: Yes, he’s great at the miniatures.

Moebius: What composers did you study and listen to when you were a student?

MN: When I was in high school and playing with the Brown University Orchestra, we played the Old Masters, but also the way-out stuff, like the Sibelius Symphony #1—this weird, icy piece. I started listening to music like that: Sibelius, the Mahler symphonies, Bartok.

Moebius: When you’re a young violist you have to get used to “weird” 20th century music pretty early on—once you’re proficient it’s time to play the Bartok Concerto, the Walton Concerto, Hindemith, Bloch…

MN: Right, because there just isn’t that much for us in the 19th century. There’s Berlioz’s Harold in Italy, the Brahms sonatas…

Moebius: Schumann’s Marchenbilder…

MN: But most of the major repertoire for the viola is from the 20th century. Composers would write for William Primrose, or he’d approach them about writing something for him.

Moebius: One hears stories about 300 people auditioning for one spot in a symphony orchestra, or about Juilliard graduates taking jobs in small regional orchestras, or about tenure-track positions in university music programs drying up. Are classical musicians being overproduced? Or are jobs for them being underproduced?

MN: There just aren’t enough places to go once you graduate from music school. Some will go on to graduate school. Some will eventually get university positions, or go into teaching. But the main place to go is an orchestra, and there aren’t enough openings. For me, that wasn’t the right choice. My first year out of school I played with the Dallas Symphony. It was a terrible situation. You get there and you’re excited—first professional experience. But the musicians there were done with music. It was a job. Buy a house, buy a car, start a family, play in the symphony. The music didn’t really matter anymore. If you’re playing all the time, and playing the same music, you lose the love of it. It’s a real shame. The composer did all this work on his music, and we should think of it as a
luxury, that we have the time to really examine it. But you still have to care about music to do that. You do care in college, and you take the time to get to know the music, with sectionals, master classes, lessons, but in professional orchestras you might not take the time. So there can be a high rate of burnout.

Moebius: My viola teacher [the late Wayne Crouse, principal violist with the Houston Symphony for 30 years] liked to play chamber music to avoid burnout. He said chamber music was a democracy; the orchestra is a dictatorship.

MN: Exactly. In major orchestras, you can’t even ask the conductor a question. You have to ask the principal player, who will ask the conductor. That’s just ridiculous to me. In the SLO Symphony, anyone can ask me questions.

Moebius: In addition to conducting the SLO Symphony, you work in the Los Angeles film recording industry, playing viola and conducting studio orchestras. It’s often said that the best musicians in L.A. aren’t in the Philharmonic; they’re in the film recording industry. Is the same true for the quality of the music itself?

MN: Exactly. I think so. There are some really brilliant composers working in film. If I were a young composer today I’d want to be in Hollywood, getting my music played. What are the options for a composer out of music school? You can get affiliated with a school, become a composer-in-residence, but that can’t happen for everyone. It’s difficult to get your music performed. In a film, your music will be heard by millions of people. They’ll be captivated. That’s what you’re looking for. You’re right, studio musicians are some of the finest players in the world. The things they can do on a first reading of a new piece! It’s just amazing, and it really keeps you on your toes. It’s an unpredictable profession; you never know what you’ll get. Some days it’s really easy, all whole notes, and you go home rested. Other days the music is fast and difficult technically, and you go home just exhausted. Recently I’ve been doing the score for Speedracer, and it’s all this fast race-car music. It tires you out by the end of the day. But it’s worth it.

Moebius: Going back to where we started: music education. Where should music education fit in the school curriculum? Why is it important?

MN: Advancing music education has been a lifetime struggle for me. Here’s why it’s important: when you study music, you get more than music. You get history. You get language. You get teamwork. Learning an instrument and playing in a group can build a child’s self esteem. They might get a chance to travel with a performing group and experience other cultures. If you’re a singer, you’ll have to learn other languages—Italian, French, German—and music has its own language. So music education stimulates all these different parts of the brain. If a child doesn’t get arts education by the time they’re 12, those brain synapses won’t be sparked. They might never be able to play an instrument, paint a picture, write a poem, or even appreciate the arts fully. These things are
very difficult to learn later, without early education. I also think that studying music, especially learning an instrument, is important for a child because there is no instant gratification. Your instrument won’t sound good right away, and not for a while. It takes discipline—learning to practice—to focus that intently. It may be the only place they have to do that. Also, it’s a really odd thing to do—all the instruments are so different in how they’re played, some you blow into in certain ways, some you hold in really unnatural ways. Kids learn all the detail and the discipline of mastering those techniques. Arts education gives kids the rudiments, the basics, which they might pursue or not. But they’ve been given the basics, and they can use them in the future to expand their repertoire as a human being. If there are no performing ensembles in a school, kids will find other groups to join. Gangs. And—this isn’t how we normally think of creativity—but their creativity will be expressed in violence.

Moebius: Arts education can also give you a creative outlet as an adult. Instead of watching TV or Web surfing, you can go to a choir rehearsal, a painting class, a writing group.

MN: Yes. I think of the SLO Symphony as like our Thursday night bowling league. There’s such a sense of community. Do you realize there are people who’ve been playing in that group for 40 years? Some of these guys remember playing in churches, or at Cuesta College. The orchestra has come a long way because we get such strong support from the community: the donors, the audience, the PAC, Cal Poly—[Cal Poly President] Warren Baker has been a strong supporter. He’s a Red Sox fan like me, so that helps. At the free dress rehearsals I’ll look out at the auditorium and think “there are 1100 people here who want to hear us. There’s a real desire for what we do. And it’s just a rehearsal.” I’ve been here 24 years, and my goal is to stay here long enough that the next conductor, to beat my record, will have to live to be over one hundred years old!

Moebius: We’re going on tour this summer.

MN: Yes, in June we’re traveling to L.A. to play at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. It’s a concert of Craig Russell’s music. We’ve got great soloists: Kathleen Lenski, violin; Richard Todd, french horn; Jose Maria Gallardo del Rey, guitar. We’re working hard this year with sectionals and workshops getting ready for this performance. That’s where it will all pay off. 😊

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted (Winter 2008) by David Hennessee, who plays viola with the SLO Symphony.