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Interview with Sandi Sigurdson

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Sandi Sigurdson

INTERVIEW WITH SANDI SIGURDSON

**Former Executive Director of the
San Luis Obispo Symphony**

From 1994 to 2009, Sandi Sigurdson was executive director of the San Luis Obispo Symphony. During that time, she managed its growth from a small community orchestra to the respected, successful, and internationally known organization it is today. She currently serves as director of Leadership SLO, a program affiliated with the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce that works to identify and develop effective community leaders who will advance the educational, cultural, and economic interests of county communities.

Moebius: Tell me about your early life. Did you want to run a symphony when you grew up?

SS: [laughs] I'm the oldest of five—five children born in six years. I was born in British Columbia, but spent my childhood in San Diego and later Los Angeles—Inglewood. When I was a kid, across the alley from us lived an older couple, Mr. and Mrs. Large. They were about sixty, and I thought of them as “ancient.” Mrs. Large died and Mr. Large moved away, but before he did he gave me his portable record player and enormous collection of 78s - almost all classical... and Mario Lanza.

Moebius: Lanza was sort of the “Il Divo” or Andrea Bocelli of the time, right?

SS: Exactly. I loved organizing this huge collection of records, and I especially fell in love with Tchaikovsky's “Swan Lake.” I knew the story and put together performances with my siblings as ballerinas, and myself as the star, of course. We'd charge my parents and anyone else five cents to watch the performance.

Moebius: So even as a little kid you were organizing and managing performers?

SS: I guess I was! Also, unlike my mother who never sat down, my best friend's mother listened to jazz and classical in the evenings, and I just thought that was the most refined, civilized thing to do. We were fortunate to live close to several major performance venues. We'd go to the Pilgrimage Theater (now the Ford Theater) and to the Hollywood Bowl for jazz and Fourth of July concerts. We'd get seats in the nosebleed section (\$2 per ticket—can you believe that!), pick up some KFC, and watch the L.A. Phil. There's something about Tchaikovsky and fireworks.

Moebius: We've spoken before about how Tchaikovsky is a great “starter” composer—repetitive, hummable melodies, no dissonance... I used to listen to the symphonies and ballets a lot as a kid.

SS: Me, too. With Tchaikovsky the emotions are so big and in-your-face, and that's where you're at as a kid and a teenager. These days, though, I like big-old-ballsy, complex music: Mahler and Metallica! And Barber!

Moebius: So you went to a lot of concerts in L.A.?

SS: Yes, especially after two performance spaces came on the scene: The L.A. Music Center and the Forum (did I hear that it was getting torn down?). When these opened, there was a ton of buzz; everyone wanted to go, me included. I was about twelve or thirteen and saw the Supremes with Little Stevie Wonder (who's the same age as me), BB King... Grand Funk Railroad was my first rock concert. They were so loud, I couldn't hear for days! OH! And I loved your symphony blog entry last year, David, that included Petula Clark video. I saw her and met her family at the Coconut Grove. It was great to have this easy access to music and have these venues as part of your life. It's my hope that we do something similar with the San Luis Obispo Symphony—make music an easy part of people's lives through the concerts at the Performing Arts Center (PAC), the free dress rehearsals, the Pops concerts at Avila Beach, and the chamber music concerts around the county.

Moebius: Do you still make it to L.A. for concerts?

SS: I do. My husband (Steve McGrath), myself, and our friends the Spatafores are subscribers to the L.A. Opera. On performance days we leave SLO at 8 a.m., eat lunch on the plaza at the Music Center, and then the performance starts at 2 p.m. It's over about 6 or 7 p.m., then we drive back. Lately we've been getting into Wagner and "The Ring Cycle." I'm coming late to opera, and it's a revelation. It's like the first time you eat Thai food—you never knew that food could have flavor combinations like that. Our first L.A. Opera was an amazing production of *Tannhäuser*. The set was all in red and there were people simulating sex onstage, and the virginal and holy heroine was all in white. It's hard to explain how powerful it was, but five hours later I was on the edge of my seat, sobbing at the beauty and nobility of this woman. I felt the same way about the Pacific Repertory Opera's production of *Madama Butterfly* last spring. The music, the modern sensibility, the exploration of racism. I was dazzled.

Moebius: What other performances stand out in memory?

SS: As I got older, if I wanted to see a concert but couldn't find anyone to go with me, I'd just go by myself. I saw Dave Brubeck [legendary jazz pianist], and in college I got to see Aaron Copland conduct at the University of Colorado at Boulder (Go Buffs!). I'll never forget that; I was in the first row just mesmerized by this tall, thin man conducting with a lifetime of experience behind him.

Moebius: How did you wind up in San Luis Obispo?

SS: I worked for fifteen years in Southern California in hotel and restaurant manage-

ment. After Steve and I married, we made a conscious decision to “live the SLO life.” I worked part-time at a doctor’s office in Cambria, and in 1988 we bought a house in SLO. (Twenty-one years later we’re still in this house. They’ll have to take us out feet first.) I began looking for a job and heard that the SLO Symphony was looking for a secretary. I got the job and worked for two years under Cricket Handler, who was executive director at the time. Then she stepped down, and I took over as interim director. I didn’t think I’d do it for very long. Then they did a big search; I applied and got the job.

Moebius: What changed your mind about doing the job on a more permanent basis?

SS: I liked the musicians! I also saw that I could do valuable work for the organization. Mike was building this talented orchestra with strong community ties and Cricket had laid a strong foundation for the group to become more professional in terms of policies and organization. Together they launched the music education program. I saw a lot of potential and room for growth and wanted to be part of that.

Moebius: The orchestra certainly has grown over the years. Why do you think that is?

SS: Well, Mike Nowak is a brilliant programmer and nurturing conductor and our musicians are so talented and dedicated. We owe a lot of our growth to the completion of the PAC in 1996. It was a big, sexy draw for audiences when it opened. The first year we played there, we were sold-out on subscriptions. There were hundreds of people we just couldn’t seat, the demand was so high. A lot of groups using the PAC experienced the same demand, so they doubled or even tripled their programming. There was some pressure for us to add Friday night or Saturday afternoon shows. It’s much, much to Mike’s credit that he said: no, let’s see how it goes and not respond to this immediate pressure. Then demand tapered off, and some of those other groups faced half-empty halls, but our demand stayed high. Then in 1999 tech stocks crashed. All of a sudden no one had any money, but we rode that out and were able to continue serving the community and even add the free dress rehearsals. We continued to sell out the Saturday evening concerts. We expanded music education and merged with the Youth Symphony, which was an investment in the future. Kathleen Lenski [Grammy-award winning violinist] moved to the area in 2000, and with her we started the chamber music concerts, bringing what we do to different parts of the county.

Moebius: How did your job change as the orchestra grew?

SS: I used to do a lot of the bookkeeping and payroll, record keeping and such. There was a wonderful and oh-so-curmudgeonly volunteer to help with that, Alan Goldsmith, a Jewish-Austrian expatriate who actually experienced Kristallnacht. Can you believe that? When I first started it was me and a part-time secretary and a part-time music education/marketing coordinator. Think about it: those are two very different jobs. Now we have a brilliant staff of seven, led by Patty Thayer, dozens of volunteers, and of course

the hard-working board of directors. A big change from the old days. We used to do it all: take out the trash, vacuum... oh! A great example of that: when we played in Pismo at the Church of the Nazarene, I'd hand-write Row A, Row B, Row C, ect. on adhesive file folder labels and put them on the carpet to show people which row their seats were in!

Moebius: You're open about not having formal musical training. What's that been like, working for an orchestra?

SS: Well, I did sing in high school and still love to sing.... badly. Former music education director Jaime Lewis and I are going to L.A. Master Chorale in December for a sing-along Messiah. But sometimes in discussions with my more musical executive director peers, I don't get all the classical references or jokes. I'm so lucky that Mike has always very been kind and patient about schooling me. He's never been anything but willing to educate me about classical music. For example, I simply didn't know there was a trombone and a bass trombone.

Moebius: Does a bass trombone burn longer?

SS: Bad joke! But I get it!

Moebius: What was your favorite part of the job as executive director? What was most enjoyable?

SS: Two things come to mind. Friday night rehearsals in the hall at the Performing Arts Center, before the Saturday afternoon dress rehearsal and evening concert. [Until concert week, the orchestra usually rehearses in the PAC Pavilion, a large room, not in Harmon Hall.] Friday rehearsal was like a little sneak preview, a chance to hear the orchestra just before they're ready to launch into the Saturday public performances. It was always fascinating to observe the process of putting the final touches on the music. It was such a privilege to be one of about three people in the hall for that. That's a part of the job I never took for granted, that I got to be one of those lucky people. Also, all Youth Symphony concerts. I loved every single one.

Moebius: I went to one last year, and it was really inspiring. The kids were so full of life and the joy of making music, you couldn't help but enjoy it.

SS: And the focus! They are so focused on the music! From a marketing point of view it's hard to photograph the Youth Symphony kids while they're playing because they all have such intense looks on their faces, not happy and smiling like people expect to see kids.

Moebius: On the flip side, what was your least favorite part of the job?

SS: I'd have to say that by the end I was tired of putting on parties. In the last few years I let the rest of the staff take the lead on those. Parties are just very time consuming to organize, with so many details: what caterer to use, what color tablecloths to have... but

they are SO important. Here's the thing, parties, receptions: these are chances for the audience to socialize with Mike and the musicians, and those opportunities are what build relationships or deepen them. Those relationships can make the difference between someone just applauding the orchestra's performance versus volunteering their time or donating money. At the Symphony Ball we started the "Parties with a Purpose" series to, of course, raise money but truly to give the audience and musicians more chances to get to know each other.

Moebius: I hear the Marine Mammal Center in Morro Bay is starting a similar series: "Parties with a Porpoise."

SS: [Groans]

Moebius: Tell me about the Association of California Symphony Orchestras (ACSO) and your work with them.

SS: My predecessor, Cricket Handler, established the relationship with ACSO and our involvement grew from there. In the early days I went alone to one ACSO workshop or conference per year. Then the SLO Symphony board made a commitment to the organization's professional development, so a culture of on-going training and peer networking flourished. There was a commitment for the staff, the board, Mike, and musicians to get involved. ACSO workshops and round tables gave us each a chance to talk to our peers about doing our respective jobs and to learn from their experience.

Say I'm in the middle of problems with finance, marketing, whatever. Instead of wrestling inside my own feeble head I'm talking to other executive directors, and from them I may get ideas about how to solve those problems. More importantly, getting involved in ACSO taught us that we really need to know who we are and what our role is in the community. Think about that: all decisions, whether about Youth Symphony, finances, touring, etc. flow from knowing who we are and what our role is. Mission, vision, values. Mike has really led in these areas. Especially after 9/11 he had a strong sense of how our orchestra could help the community heal. That purpose hadn't been part of our mission to such an extent before 9/11, and now we have a greater sense of our particular contribution to the community.

Moebius: I remember when I interviewed Mike a few years ago he spoke about concerts as offering people a break from all the stresses of life and a chance to recharge spiritually.

SS: That's so true. In my job I wasn't making music, but my role was to put the foundation in place so the creative people, the musicians, could have the freedom to do their work and perform that service. There are so many elements that have to be in place for an arts organization to thrive: legal transparency, policy, procedures, finance. I learned a lot from participating in ACSO roundtables with executive directors, board presidents,

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marketing directors. The Kennedy Center's president, Michael Kaiser, spoke recently at an ACSO conference and summed it up: the key to success is great art, well marketed. The artistic director dreams the dreams and thinks big, and the organization has to keep up with those dreams and aspirations, to bring them to fruition. Through our ACSO association we met folks who helped us to reach for our dreams: The Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra mentored us on grant writing. Joe Truskot from the Monterey Symphony was an organizational mentor. And overall, our association with ACSO raised the profile of the SLO Symphony. We're well regarded in the state of California.

Moebius: How did you notice the symphony changing during your tenure as executive director?

SS: I think we learned to better understand our role: not just to put on concerts, but to support and advance the cause of classical music in the community. Understanding that mission helped enormously with decision making. For example, we send a string quartet into public schools to expose the kids to strings and build interest. A symphony board member once suggested that we send a jazz quartet, and he had lots of good arguments for doing that. Now, I'm a jazz fan. I think showcasing all the different instruments would be wonderful. But our mission is to promote and preserve classical music. And we have limited resources for doing that. So we focus on educating about strings, the defining element of the orchestra. I also got to witness the orchestra grow artistically. There's money set aside for the musicians' professional development. You guys can't all go to L.A. for lessons, so Mike brings L.A. to you with guest artists and master classes.

Moebius: That's a good point. We're very lucky that he has those connections. Everyone was raving about [cello virtuoso] Lynn Harrell's master class, and the cello section sounded great afterwards. And just being onstage with really fine musicians ups your game.

SS: Exactly. And you know, we spend as much on musicians' pay as similar-sized orchestras. We just have more rehearsals. We have six rehearsals spread out over a month for one performance. That's really unusual. So on one hand, the per-service pay for the musicians is less than for other orchestras that don't rehearse as much. But on the other hand, that's what we do to deliver the best performances.

Moebius: The theme for this issue of Moebius is "Campus Controversies." During your tenure as executive director of the SLO Symphony, were there any controversies?

SS: There was some controversy over touring: what it means, why we should do it. In the end, the orchestra musicians were always proud musical ambassadors and our community loved it! The Symphony/Youth Symphony merger required the skilled facilitation of Sharon Young, who brought us together. Then there were occasional issues with programming: letters to the editor, comments in reviews, or comments about reviews.

But, you know, I love it that we live in a community of music fans who care so much about classical music and know what they want and what they don't want. And I also love it that the audience is willing to trust Mike's judgment in programming the classics but also exploring new musical experiences.

Moebius: In my experience, controversies in arts groups blow over pretty quickly since everyone is primarily focused on the creative process.

SS: Yes, with open communication problems can't get traction.

Moebius: What's the symphony's relationship with Cal Poly been like?

SS: The symphony has been playing on the Cal Poly campus for many years. The connection to the campus runs deep and many Cal Poly alumni, faculty, staff, and students play in the orchestra. Because Mike has deep respect for conductors like David Arrivee [Music Professor and conductor of the Cal Poly Symphony], we have a policy that a qualified student can play in the SLO Symphony and the Cal Poly Symphony but can't opt to just play with SLO Symphony. We have the same policy for talented Youth Symphony musicians—they can perform in both groups, but their first allegiance must be to the Youth Symphony. If all of us (Cal Poly Symphony, the Youth Symphony, and the SLO Symphony) didn't make this commitment, then the SLO Symphony would just be a scavenger, picking off the best players, and the student groups would suffer.

Moebius: I didn't know that. What a great idea! It's a wonderful educational experience for young musicians to play with more mature musicians. But it's equally valuable for them to take a leadership role in a group of players younger or less accomplished than they are.

SS: We really are blessed to live in an area that has such a strong music community. There's so much going on, with so many institutions (like Cal Poly and Cuesta College) and individuals (like Cliff Swanson—retired Cal Poly music professor and founder of the Mozart Festival, now Festival Mozaic) who have fostered a culture of music and music education. Moreover, all the different performing arts cooperate really well. We try not to step on each other's dates for concerts and fundraisers, and we promote each other's events. We strive to avoid the idea of competition; the idea is, more music is more music, and everyone wins.

Moebius: Also, a lot of musicians perform in several different groups. For example, my violist colleague Pat Lamprecht sings with the Vocal Arts Ensemble, and a lot of us play for the Cuesta Master Chorale, for church services, or PCPA, or in various small ensembles... the list goes on.

SS: I can remember a time when Mike was concerned about long lapses of time when the orchestra wouldn't be rehearsing or performing. Back in the day we'd have a season opening concert in October, then the orchestra might not play together again until Feb-

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ruary. But with all these other performing opportunities like the ones you mentioned, there are plenty of chances for musicians to keep their chops up. There's just such a vibrant music scene here.

Moebius: What have been some of the challenges the symphony has faced over the years?

SS: Let's see... when I took over as executive director, we had a fairly small budget. Then sometime in the late 90s, the tech stocks crashed. Our endowment had been in a growing position, then all of a sudden it wasn't. So because of that, I was told to trim \$50,000 from the budget. Now, that was maybe 20 percent of the entire budget. As a result of that situation, we initiated some policies that would protect our financial stability. But still, it was a shocking and difficult time. More recently, when the recession hit and the stock market took another dive, the staff and orchestra took pay cuts. But having gone through the earlier crisis, Mike and I had hope. We knew we were on the downside of a cycle, that the economy would come back, and it was our job was to hold on until it did.

Oye! Then there was the 2001 tour to Carnegie Hall and Washington, DC. A week before we left for New York, I got a call telling me that the World Trade Organization would be meeting in D.C. two blocks from where we were going to play; I think they were actually meeting at the Watergate. The D.C. police were expecting mobs of protesters, and if they got out of hand, the police planned to shut down all traffic in ten-block radius. That area included Lisner Auditorium on the campus of George Washington University—the Auditorium where the SLO Symphony was scheduled to play! I told the president of the symphony board of directors about this possibility, but I didn't tell Mike or the orchestra, so as not to worry them. Instead, I arranged for another venue, busses to get us there, and marketing to promote the change in venue. Our performance went on as originally planned, but the whole time we were in New York, I held my breath.

Moebius: That's quite a story. From my perspective in the orchestra, there's so much that the staff does behind the scenes that I don't know about; I just sort of take it granted. It's as if season brochures, programs, and paychecks just magically appear.

SS: And for the staff, the music just seems magically to happen. It's a sign that the relationship between artists and staff is working well when we can have the luxury of taking each other for granted.

Moebius: Do any other challenging situations come to mind?

SS: Well the Tour Down Under was "artistically fantastic" as we sometimes say when we're looking on the bright side and bummed about a lack of "butts in the bleachers." In preparation for the Australia tour, we did lots of research and advance marketing; we

talked to the communities there; we connected with the local symphonies. Even so, there was poor attendance at many of the concerts. That was heartbreaking for everyone.

Moebius: Why do you think that was?

SS: I'm not really sure. We tried to figure it out—we have a three-inch thick book of marketing samples from the tour: flyers, posters, magazine tear sheets, news ads, and news stories. It's a different country; there may have been some hubris on our part. Thank heavens that at the Sydney Opera House, we were part of a festival, and that was well attended. That was amazing, to play at this famous hall on the other side of the world.

Moebius: Do any memories of your fifteen years with the symphony really stand out?

SS: In all our talks, I haven't said enough about the board of directors. Those guys are willing to sweat blood for the orchestra. Year in and year out they show up for myriad meetings, strategize improvements to the organization, listen to Mike's artistic guidance, and give generously of their time, talent, and treasure because they love the art and they love the San Luis Obispo Symphony. Unsung heroes indeed.

But there is this memory that will always stay with me. Several years ago, I was attending the Friday rehearsal before the Saturday opening night concert. One of my daughters was very sick and would have to miss opening night for the first time. The orchestra was going to rehearse Elgar's "Enigma Variations," one of my favorite pieces. Mike thought he might just do sections of it, but then wound up playing the whole thing. I sat alone in the hall, listening to the Elgar, filled with worry about my daughter. As I listened, I looked from to face to face at the musicians onstage. There was Martha Uhey, who had taught my kids in school. There was Pam Dassenko who'd watched my daughter grow and loved and encouraged her. There was Ginette Reitz, who was my son's violin teacher. There was Dr. Jim McKinney, who gave us advice on our daughter's health. There was Randy Garacci, who always gave me hugs. There was Barbara Hoff, who had lost her son and knew that terrible grief. There was Jane Swanson, who reassured me all would be well. There was Mike, the first person I had called when I knew just how precarious my darling's situation was. As I listened to Elgar's earnest, profound music, I thought about the personal experiences I'd had with every musician on that stage. I reflected on what I'd gained. I was alone in the dark, but somehow I was sustained. In those terrifying moments before my daughter got better, I was reaching out for hope, and I got it from "the little orchestra that could." ☹

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