

Musical Merger: SLO Symphony & SLO County Youth Symphony

After four years of strategic alliance the San Luis Obispo Symphony and the San Luis Obispo County Youth Symphony merged, a decision which was made after much serious consideration and several months of facilitated discussions, meetings, and planning on the part of both organizations. Having a shared mission for music education, it was a natural step for the two organizations that had been linked together administratively since 2002.

When the relationship officially began, the Youth Symphony had grown enough in size and complexity to need more than a part-time manager. The Youth Symphony board voted to “hire” the Symphony’s administrative staff to provide management, development, marketing and more. Given the positive changes brought about by that alliance, the two boards of directors felt it was in the best interest of both organizations to assess and discuss the possibility of a closer relationship.

The process of evaluating the relationship between the Youth Symphony and Symphony was funded by a James Irvine Foundation “Art Inspires!” grant through the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation. Leadership and staff representatives from both the SLO Symphony and the SLO County Youth Symphony met bi-monthly to evaluate the effectiveness of two separate organizations with shared missions. Ultimately, the discussion led to the possibility of a merger. Through task force meetings and stakeholder interviews led by an organizational consultant, the Symphony and Youth Symphony discovered that their common purpose – to foster symphonic music education and provide orchestral training and performance opportunities for young people – would be best fulfilled as one organization rather than two.

Those involved with the process had many positive things to say: “Music education has been one of my highest priorities since coming to San Luis Obispo in 1984,” said Michael Nowak, Music Director for the SLO Symphony. “Now, with the merging of these two excellent organizations, we will be better able to bring the joy of music to young people than ever before.”

“This is a golden opportunity for our community to strengthen arts education for children. Working together as one, this organization will have an impact on more children in San Luis Obispo. We can provide a comprehensive opportunity for string instruction from beginning level classes, early ensembles and the highest level symphonic orchestra performance,” said Carol Kersten, conductor of two Youth Symphony ensembles: Preparatory Strings and Academy Orchestra.

Youth Symphony Orchestra Conductor Nancy Nagano added: “During the past four years, I have seen the Youth Symphony grow by leaps and bounds, due in large part to Symphony management. I look forward to working in concert with Michael, Sandi (Sigurdson, Executive Director of the SLO Symphony) and the entire SLO Symphony staff to reach out and benefit more San Luis Obispo County kids.”

The mission of the San Luis Obispo County Youth Symphony is to provide high-quality orchestral ensemble education and performance opportunities to local youth; and to reach out to the Central Coast community, introducing new audiences of adults and children to symphonic music. The mission of the San Luis Obispo Symphony is to support an outstanding community orchestra, to foster symphonic and chamber music education, and to contribute to the cultural and economic vitality of the Central Coast community.