

Jim Svejda

SoCal's voice of classical music

BY BARRY STRINGFELLOW

Classical music lovers in Southern California and around the world know the distinctive voice of Jim Svejda, the evening host on Classical KUSC radio (91.5 FM in Los Angeles). In a time when classical music stations are a dying breed, KUSC is flourishing. And remarkably, in the crowded Los Angeles market, Svejda's show, weeknights from 7 P.M. to midnight, is usually ranked in the top 10. Svejda lives in Sierra Madre with his wife, Cathy, and his West Highland terriers, Abby and Bruno.

Q: Where did you first break into radio?

Svejda: In the early '70s, in Syracuse, New York, the smallest town in America served by a full-time classical station. I called the general manager, Henry Fogel, who later became head of the American Symphony Orchestra League, and said, "I don't know anything about radio, but I do know a lot about music. Do you need any part-time announcers?" He gave me a pronunciation test—two names, Aldo Ceccato and Stanislaw Skrowaczewski—and he hired me on the spot.

Q: You went from Syracuse to Boston to San Francisco, then to Los Angeles in 1978. What was your image of Southern California before you came here?

Svejda: Shallow, superficial, people wouldn't know a lot—and was I dead wrong. This is

the most sophisticated audience anywhere. In the '30s and '40s, the European émigrés made L.A. the center of the classical music world. Two of the greatest composers lived here: [Arnold] Schoenberg in Brentwood and [Igor] Stravinsky in Hollywood. Felix Slatkin, the concertmaster of the Fox Studio Orchestra, and his wife, Eleanor, the principal cellist with the Warner Studio Orchestra, started the Hollywood String Quartet. It's the greatest string quartet that's ever made recordings, far and away. It's like whoever is in second place may as well be in a different category. The greatest musicians on earth are playing in the Hollywood studios. It's the most lucrative gig in classical music. What you hear in movies is incredibly complex music, and these people sight-read it.



Q: Gustavo Dudamel is taking over the Los Angeles Philharmonic at 28, Esa-Pekka Salonen was 34 when he took over, and Zubin Mehta was 26. Is this an L.A. phenomenon?

Svejda: Yes, in a way. L.A. really does things its own way, thank God. It's the most exciting musical life in America, still. There are just no rules. It's just so hard to be stuffy about anything and not look like a complete idiot.

Q: You've been known to ruffle a few feathers in the music world. Any interviews come to mind?

Svejda: My interview with Twyla Tharp. I admitted things I shouldn't have, like that I think ballet is silly, and she, understandably, took exception to that. It was all good-natured and wonderfully pugilistic.

Q: Are there any bands or orchestras in Southern California that people should know about?

Svejda: The Da Camera Society. They present chamber music in historic sites, like the Doheny Mansion, and also in odd places, like power stations. And they fit the music and the performance to the venue. It's uncanny how they get it exactly right.

Q: What do you listen to while you drive?

Svejda: That's when I catch up on all the new music and music by composers I'm going to have on the show. That's the nice thing about living in L.A. You get a lot of time in your car. **W**

KUSC can be heard from Morro Bay to San Diego. Find your local frequency at kusc.org.