

## IN THE FIELD WITH MICHAEL SCHUBERT

### Accomplished Translator, Musician, and Cyclist Michael Schubert Let Us In for a Backstage Peek into His Background and Work

By Diana Dudgeon



Accomplished translator, musician and cyclist Michael Schubert let us in for a backstage peek into his background and work

Michael Schubert is an ATA-certified German to English translator and a former orchestral flutist. Raised in Los Angeles, he spent a decade working in Germany as a freelance musician touring extensively throughout Western Europe and performing symphonic and chamber music, opera, film scores, musicals, and on numerous CD recordings.

Mr. Schubert served on the NCTA Board of Directors from 2005 to 2009 as the webmaster and he continues to be actively involved in our association. Whether it is writing a software review for Translorial or presenting his Getting Started workshop for newcomers, he has repeatedly contributed his knowledge and expertise to our community. He specializes in legal, financial and IT translation, and his career has been strongly marked by technology. In our interview, he emphasizes the importance for translators to master not only their language skills, but also their computer skills since they are no longer optional.

#### **Which was first: German or Germany?**

German! Although I am of German descent, I only began learning German at age 19. My love of German Romanticism made me want to study the language – originally as a general education requirement, later as a minor, eventually as a second major. I spent a year of my university studies in Heidelberg, then I moved to Germany right out of college and worked there for 10 years.

#### **Did the musician become a linguist or did the linguist become a musician?**

My early career ambitions were always in music – to become a professional orchestral flutist. Thanks to my degree in German and my year abroad, I had the opportunity to start my career in Germany, which has much more work for classical musicians than the US. I earned my living as a freelance musician in Germany for 10 years. When I returned to California in 2000, I began exploring translation in order to supplement my music career. But almost immediately, my prospects in translation were so much better that I soon put my music aside altogether. And without reluctance – music is a harsh mistress, as we say!

#### **In both careers you have worked as a freelancer. Businesswise, are there similarities?**

The common requirements are discipline, ambition, good organization, and independence. And flexibility, since you work with a large cast of characters.

#### **On that musical note, have you found patterns in your “soloist” working habits?**

I work from my home office weekdays from early morning to mid-afternoon. Then I typically exercise, and if things are particularly busy, I return for an evening shift. I relish quiet and solitude when I’m working, so I’ve never felt drawn to a shared workspace. Over the years, I’ve learned to keep more reg-

ular hours. That way, my clients know when they can count on me. And without regular hours, we freelancers know that you can easily end up working day and night!

#### **What would be your ultimate piece of advice to succeed as a freelance translator?**

First, never stop learning and networking. Language is dynamic, so we have to stay engaged to stay good at what we do. And we learn so much from one another! Second, embrace technology. We freelance translators must have excellent computer skills. A CAT tool, a system for managing projects and invoices, a sophisticated mail client, a backup concept – all of this is indispensable.

#### **You know them both: Are translators artists?**

To some extent, of course. There are so many ways to turn a phrase, so translators have to be creative and have a flair for making a translation sound natural, fluid, and yes – beautiful! Even in something as dry as a license agreement. It takes both skill and artistry to translate bloated, verbose legalese into a target text that conveys the same meaning without duplicating the sins of the original. But our creativity is also heavily constrained by the source content, of course. It’s not so different in music, by the way. It may seem highly creative to the listener, but there is a tremendous amount of “instructions” to follow – in classical music, at least!

#### **Years ago you wrote a clearly expert review on STAR Transit NXT, what is your current favorite tool?**

I use SDL Trados Studio 2014. Not that I’ve tried every tool and chosen this one on its merits, but because it’s the dominant tool, because I know it well, and because it does everything I need. The predecessor products Trados Workbench and

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TagEditor were really quite dreadful – I always refer to them as hair removal programs – but the Studio products introduced in 2009 are excellent!

#### **What do you mean by hair removal programs?**

They make you pull your hair out!

#### **What role has translation technology played in your career?**

I've loved personal computers from the day I switched on my very first PC. I burned a lot of midnight oil learning my way around the Windows operating system, the Microsoft Office suite, and various utilities and CAT tools. For freelance translators, computer skills are just as important as our language skills!

#### **What is your ideal translation job?**

I'm at my best translating website content. No content a business generates is more important than its website – its window to the entire world, a source of information for both existing and prospective clients. My ideal translation job is when a client writes good German copy, then gives me the necessary background information and license to produce good English copy.

#### **Is there any project or topic you would like to highlight at this time?**

Over the years, I've translated a number of academic papers written by German-speaking professors for publication in English-language musicological journals. My background makes me uniquely qualified for such jobs, but academic writing is so dense and lofty that I find these projects to be tougher than anything else I do!

