

Bridging Cultures with the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Identify strategies for an orchestra to engage authentically with local communities.
- Demonstrate agility with outreach programming as community relationships deepen.
- Develop equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives within an orchestra for interaction with diverse communities.

Topics For Discussion

Authentic Community Engagement

The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra (SDSO), founded in 1922, serves not just Sioux Falls but also the whole of the state. This case centers on a particular community engagement initiative—the Lakota Music Project (LMP)—and expands outward to broader questions raised by this program. Since almost 10% of the population of South Dakota is Native American, the SDSO made a commitment to engaging with this important group.

- Music Director Delta David Gier opened the dialogue with members of the Lakota tribe as early as 2005 at a lunch hosted by the SDSO for Lakota and Dakota leaders within Sioux Falls. Gier's ideas for bringing music to these local communities was met with distrust. Ask students to review the factors contributing to the high level of suspicion shown by the Native American leaders. What prevented the dialogue from shutting down?
- Gier's first official travels in 2006 to Eagle Butte, South Dakota involved SDSO musicians in collaboration with a Lakota drumming group from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. What happened in this first attempt at securing a partnership?
 - ♦ Community engagement initiatives, particularly ones involving substantial travel, are a cost to the organization as much as the benefit it could provide. Poll the students to ask if they would be torn at that stage from an administrative perspective.
- One of the major lessons of the case is that community engagement cannot be “pushed” as a uni-directional initiative. Partners and liaisons are essential. What partners emerged that facilitated the early success of the LMP? What did each of these allies contribute to the project?

- Gier revealed his motivation for persisting with the LMP in his reflections after Phase I. These considerations might be applied to community engagement in general for arts organizations: “Number one: you do the right thing. Number two: do the right thing for the right reason. Number three: do the right the right way.” How did Gier explain this simple formula? How does his thinking play out in the phases of the LMP?
 - ♦ Later in the case, the “Do the Right Thing” idea underpins a more detailed set of considerations in forming community partnerships. Review the expanded “rubric” developed by Delta David Gier with students. How has the music director’s thinking broadened? As an experiment, invite students to think of how they might apply the rubric to something in their sphere. From what is known about various local communities in their current geographic setting, what partnerships seem most actionable?
- The activities of the LMP had only taken place across South Dakota until 2019, when a chamber music group of SDSO players and two Native American artists (Emanuel Blackbear and Bryan Akipa) traveled to Washington DC for tour performances at the National Cathedral and the National Museum of the American Indian (of the Smithsonian). SDSO Executive Director Jennifer Teisinger noted that the purpose of the LMP was difficult to communicate to its presenters, as their contacts in Washington did not completely understand how the project could serve as a bridge to cultural understanding. DC journalists were quick to politicize the motives of the LMP, for example. The program fares much better locally where audiences better recognize state history and populations. Yet, the humanistic themes of the LMP are international and shared. Should the LMP continue to focus its presentations locally or expand more globally? How can communication about the program transform to allow the partnership to be known more widely and have the potential to tour?

Deepening Community Relationships

- The case study journeys through the three phases of the LMP, beginning with the earliest performances of a Lakota drumming group in concert with small groups of SDSO musicians. Solicit student input on their impression of the evolution of the phases on the whole. In what directions did the project transform over more than a decade? Consult **Appendix 1** for a sense of the programming.
- Phase II of the LMP produced some guiding principles articulated internally at the SDSO. Review the three principles with students (safe space for dialogue; common humanity; and peaceful collaboration). Can students propose additional takeaways following Phase I? What can be said about the costs or value to the symphony of continuing the work?
- The SDSO developed three broad goals for Phase II of the LMP. The symphony was intent on continuing its relationships with existing partners from Phase I, while extending the LMP program to new South Dakota reservations and communities. It further sought “like-minded” organizational partners to increase the scope and depth of the LMP. Ask students to rank the goals of Phase II in terms of priority for the LMP from their perspective. What assumptions inform the rankings proposed?
 - ♦ What actions did the SDSO take in support of the three goals of Phase II? What other tactics could have been implemented?

- Phase III of the LMP witnessed a further deepening of current relationships. What role did the city of Sisseton play in this latest phase? In what ways did the symphony also continue expanding the scope of the LMP to other parts of South Dakota and beyond?
 - ♦ The case mentioned the launch of a Music Composition Academy as a new facet of the LMP. The academies provide instruction to American Indian student composers. Students spend one week working with a team of three composers and unveil a composition at week's end for either string quartet or woodwind quintet. The works are then played by an SDSO ensemble in different venues around South Dakota. Invite students' opinions of this programmatic offshoot of the LMP. Does the academy deliver the broad goals of the LMP?
- Jennifer Teisinger has expressed the need for patience and agility with the LMP: "We need to be able to adapt and allow it to be messy. Sometimes it's hard to see the end of the work with this. You can do 'analysis paralysis' for a long time on this." Her remarks suggest not only the need for organizational nimbleness but also the difficulty in measuring success. Results collected from the LMP have been largely anecdotal, and the impact is localized. The SDSO has a basic idea of attendance at events, but has not placed a high priority on these numbers as value indicators. How could a program like the LMP be measured and evaluated? What quantitative and qualitative factors could the SDSO introduce and report annually?

Contact with Diverse Communities

- In 2016, the SDSO formed a committee made up of board members and musicians, but also public leaders and private industry professionals. The goal was to approach the looming issue of diversity in the organization and ideally expand community engagement initiatives in light of the inroads made by the LMP. The committee proposed the title "Bridging Cultures" as an umbrella for program outreach that the orchestra had been doing and wanted to continue.
 - ♦ What global musics had reached the SDSO mainstage in the past? What community partners were involved? Review aspects of **Appendix 2** that can spark conversation.
 - ♦ The SDSO believes that there are many communities within Sioux Falls that could benefit from an alliance with the orchestra. African-American, Latinx, and Asian communities remain of interest, as do refugee populations from a host of different countries. How could the SDSO approach these groups in light of its expanded rubric? What ideas seem to be of mutual benefit? Can the guidelines for the LMP apply more broadly to Bridging Cultures?
 - ♦ Jennifer Teisinger wondered if "Bridging Cultures" is an apt name for community partnerships over the long term. "*Bridges* connect one point to another point," she said. "Our connections are much bigger. Lakota Music Project is not just two cultures; many communities attend and understand the themes we are presenting." Collect students' ideas for a better name for this program, as well as their rationale.
 - Whatever it may be called, Teisinger has said that she would like board, staff, and players at SDSO to have an "elevator speech" ready to go on "Bridging Cultures." What does "Bridging Cultures" mean, in short? Why should people associated with the SDSO care about these efforts?

- The SDSO has been provisionally awarded a \$19,000 grant from the Catalyst Fund, a Mellon Foundation prize managed and distributed by the League of American Orchestras. The purpose of the grant is “for capacity building by encouraging effective practices to advance their understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion.” The SDSO appointed an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion committee to begin to address these issues internally. The grant will now accelerate these conversations with the hire of two consultants, one of them specializing in Native American equity, the other on broader systemic racism and implicit bias in the United States. These consultants will provide training to board members, administration, and musicians of the SDSO.
 - ♦ Jennifer Teisinger is seeing, in some ways, the SDSO hit its stride. The orchestra started on a small scale with Delta David Gier’s persistence with the LMP and has seen growth through the development of Bridging Cultures. Gier’s induction into the South Dakota Hall of Fame for his community impact with the LMP recognizes this early success. Teisinger is also eager to know how equity, diversity, and inclusion policies and processes will change after the EDI training. As the case mentioned, she believed the institution had some “catching up to do.” Addressing racism through programming was not solving problems of inequity that were lingering internally at the organization. Invite students to explore how the LMP and Bridging Cultures programming could inspire conversations about equity and inclusion inside the SDSO.
 - ♦ The Catalyst Fund award would presumably help the organization advance its understanding of large equity and diversity issues, but the proposed consultants are not coming to talk about music or the arts in particular. Once this “classroom” training is completed, Teisinger knows the SDSO will need to “walk it artistic talk,” as she put it. Assign subgroups to work on the questions below or post discussion boards on each of them for student input in advance of a formal class discussion.
 - The mission of the SDSO is “to celebrate the tradition of live orchestral music and enrich the lives of people throughout our region.” From what can be deciphered in the case and outside of it, is the orchestra delivering on its mission? What internal policies could be implemented at the SDSO?
 - How might the LMP change in light of the anticipated EDI training?
 - How can the increasing diversification in Sioux Falls be addressed organizationally and artistically? How can partnerships be struck in the increasingly multicultural landscape of Sioux Falls?
 - The Somali refugee population, the largest group of refugees in Sioux Falls, is a community that the SDSO has identified for a potential alliance. What steps can be taken to form lasting ties and create a sense of community belonging with this group of refugees?