South Dakota Symphony Orchestra (SDSO) uses music as a vehicle to build bridges between cultures, advance cultural understanding and create an environment of openness through music. At a time when many regional orchestras are struggling to remain relevant, SDSO is thriving, with a unique focus on serving the community.

“If I’m supposed to love my neighbors as myself, I need to learn what my neighbor loves.”

— Delta David Gier, South Dakota Symphony Orchestra

Innovation Story No 1

South Dakota Symphony Orchestra | Sioux Falls, SD

Leader
David Hyslop

Budget
$1M — $4,999,999

Geography
South Dakota, Native Nations

Years Active
Founded in 1922

Sharing the Sound of Community

Story by Michael Todd
Before Maya Eagle stepped up to the mic, her high school gym was a little chaotic.

More than 300 of her classmates were gathered there, along with teachers and South Dakota Symphony Orchestra staff and musicians. Like at many school assemblies, the crowd of students was loud and a bit hard for the adults to control. But Maya had no problem commanding the room.

Maya was there to introduce a piece she had written for wind quintet. Titled “No Shadows,” the music is led by a bassoon motif, which represents her uncle who had passed away only a week before she wrote it. The melody is a plaintive one that the flute, oboe and clarinet attempt to brighten. But faced with the darkness embodied by the French horn, the piece ends heartbreakingly.

Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate, SDSO composer-in-residence, acted as a “living encyclopedia,” a resource for students like Maya when they composed their own works. “Her delivery was magical, and she’s got that perfect balance of strength and love. You could hear a needle drop.”

“She had that whole school in the palm of her hand,”— Jerod Impichchaachaaha’ Tate, South Dakota Symphony Orchestra
“Towards the end of the song, the solo part that the bassoon has is dark again, and the shadow comes through,” Maya explained in a video that SDSO has now played at performances around the state. “The last five measures of the song are like what you’d hear when someone dies in a hospital, when they’re hooked up to a monitor.”

Clearly, the piece and its significance resonated with her classmates.

“When it’s over, there’s huge applause, and everybody’s giving her hugs,” says Jarod. “That’s a brand-new experience for that community right there.”

“IT WAS THE FIRST TIME A LAKOTA PERSON HAD CREATED A WIND QUINTET IN HISTORY.”

— JEROD IMPICHCHAACHAAHA’ TATE, SDSO COMPOSER-IN-RESIDENCE

A Symphony of Service

The initiative that supported Maya in writing her quintet—which itself was part of the Lakota Music Project (LMP), a multifaceted, years-long program—represents just one way the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra sees the community as conductor.

“How do we create a conduit or a ladder for people to climb?” asks SDSO music director Delta David Gier. “We want them to be the leaders in the community. I guess at the bottom of [our mission] is if I’m supposed to love my neighbors as myself, the first thing to do is to learn what my neighbor loves.”

Always at the forefront of his mind are the ways SDSO engages with other populations that need amplification, such as the state’s Muslim, Somali and Chinese communities. These thoughtful, organized partnerships are what Gier calls “bridge projects.” He realizes that this
With those ingredients, the orchestra has sent their string quartet and wind quintet to serve as in-residence teaching ensembles in high schools to perform for children who are hospitalized, and in behavioral health or after-school care facilities.

Rather than performing only classical music or playing pops concerts, SDSO also tells stories of those who are often unheard to help join together the people of South Dakota. They coordinate programs such as Memoirs, where residents at health care facilities meet with a local storyteller to put their life and experiences into a narration, which SDSO’s Dakota Wind Quintet accompanies with music.

Now, as it enters its 13th year, the Lakota Music Project is transitioning from breadth to depth, with a new phase that values spending more time in fewer communities—starting with only two: the area around the Black Hills in the western half of the state, and Sisseton, South Dakota, a small town in the northeastern corner. Sisseton Arts Council founder and director Jane Rasmussen says, “The arts are a language and an experience we can use to find commonality.” Specifically because of the orchestra’s work, Rasmussen says further steps toward understanding have been made possible, such as the town’s new crosswalk design, which incorporates elements of Native American beadwork and Scandinavian folk art.

model of service and partnership is simply easier to connect to than a modern-day orchestra’s usual goings-on.

“If the focus is on recording touring and only on artistic excellence, you get this ivory-tower syndrome, that not only most people can’t relate to, but they see it as completely irrelevant to their lives and who they are,” Gier says.

Gier came to Sioux Falls, where the orchestra is based, in 2004 after spending 15 seasons as assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic. The reason an orchestra in South Dakota was able to turn toward service faster than, say, the Philharmonic’s East Coast counterparts comes down to two things, Gier says: the nimble quality of a small but driven organization, and the can-do attitude of the surrounding community.
The organization paid off their accumulated debt two and a half years ahead of schedule. They also created a significant cash reserve and dramatically strengthened their cash position. More importantly perhaps, the crisis that led to the sustainability plan was proof that SDSO had lost some relevance within the community. Therefore, a shift toward service has not only been the altruistically right thing to do but has paid off from a financial standpoint—partly because the community is simply more interested in giving because of that shift.
Today, the orchestra is centering their efforts on SDSO 2020, a new strategic plan that is in many ways a continuation of the sustainability plan, but challenges the organization to answer their primary question: How do we realize the vision of service?

In 2016, SDSO formed a futures committee—a broad-based group of both symphony musicians and community leaders—which helped identify the biggest challenges and unrealized opportunities facing the region. SDSO’s vision of service now focuses on four areas, which the committee decided were of utmost importance: embracing growing diversity, strengthening the education system, workforce development and addiction and its impact on families.

So far, the results are promising. Where donors were once interested in just sponsoring concerts, they now are interested in these more engaging programs and how their support might have more impact.

And the impact can be immediately tangible. Speaking about the Music as Medicine program, which brings live classical music to health care facilities, Gier says the stories of patients’ improved lives, because of the orchestra’s work, are what stick with him. He recalls one winter when, due to illnesses or the weather, only one player out of the string quartet, the principal cellist, was able to make it to the Sanford Hospital.

“He just sat down in the middle of this lobby and started playing Bach by himself. Doctors, staff and patients, they were arrested by this. The music of Bach has a special effect. It’s healing just to hear it. To hear it in that context, if you were coming in for cancer treatment, imagine that sense of peace and comfort.”

“WE’RE MUSICIANS; THAT’S WHAT WE CAN DO.”

— DELTA DAVID GIER, SOUTH DAKOTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA