



# Bridge Projects

“ATTENTION IS THE RAREST AND PUREST FORM OF GENEROSITY.”

—*Simone Weil*

## *What are Bridge Projects?*

DELTA DAVID GIER EXPLAINS

A bridge project is designed to create understanding between communities which are strangers. Oftentimes people live in the same city, have impressions of one another, but actually know very little about the other. Sometimes assumptions are made about the other which result in misunderstanding, leading to the isolation of one or more communities.

How to begin to bridge that gap?

The oft-tried solution is to focus on what the differences are between communities, attempting to address conflict. Perhaps the better way to understand each other is to share what we love. Music. The universal language.

Without words which are so easy to misunderstand, we are able to respect and enjoy each other, seeing and hearing beyond the conflict, into the soul of a people. Dialogue can begin around our humanity, what we share, even though what we are sharing may take very different forms. Beauty and creativity engender an awareness of one another's highest motives, our aspirations to be better citizens of this world, and better neighbors. I have seen this work in various settings, with several different communities.

THE LATOKA MUSIC PROJECT

The pilot was the Lakota Music Project with the South Dakota Symphony, which I built carefully beginning my first season as Music Director (2004). Racial prejudice in South Dakota is much more Native American than Black or Hispanic, and the further west one goes, the more acute the problem.

I began by building relationships with Lakota leaders across the state, basically asking the question, “How can we best serve you?”

The answers came slowly and from many sources. My searching culminated one snowy night on the Pine Ridge Reservation when our principal string quartet and woodwind quintet had a four-hour jam session with a drumming group called the Porcupine Singers. We connected on many levels, but most profoundly in the importance of keeping and passing on traditions, what was best and most valuable from our cultures. We all had a strong conviction that this discovery needed to be shared—often, and with as many people as possible.

The Lakota Music Project was designed from the beginning to be an ongoing collaboration with Native



*The Lakota Music Project performed at Crazy Horse Memorial*

musicians and has had several incarnations (the most recent funded by a \$150,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation). In addition to playing music for each other and having a public dialogue around the role of music in our respective cultures, we now have four commissioned pieces for us to play together: two with drumming groups, a cedar flute concerto and a song cycle for baritone and orchestra in the Lakota language. Two of the pieces are by Native composers (Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate and Brent Michael Davids), two by SDSO principal oboist Jeffery Paul. The LMP has played on reservations and in cities, for mixed audiences in alternative venues. The adjective most used to describe the project is "healing."

#### OTHER PROJECTS

I have also worked with the Sudanese and Somali refugee communities with the Bernard Woma Ensemble. Simon Shaheen was a perfect liaison between Arab and white communities, playing a wonderful concerto with the orchestra but also going into schools and other venues to play and teach about Arab music and culture.

With composers Zhou Long and Chen Yi I created programs which have engaged the Chinese community. Their music comes directly out of their experience growing up during the Cultural Revolution in China. When they share how their experience is expressed through the music and then it is played, it opens up a wonderfully meaningful and intimate talk-back session with the audience, many of whom have also grown up in China during that time.

*"They have lifted my vision and my spirit, to hear the sounds —history, environment, culture, people and music—of the geographic places honored by their work, the Black Hills of South Dakota and the desert of the southwest."*

*—Robert Moore, Tribal Council member from Rosebud Reservation*

*"I could feel their voices in my heart .... These incredible artists sounded like one being. We were celebrating what we had in common as human beings but just as importantly we weren't trying to erase the uniqueness of each group."*

*—Audience member during inaugural tour of the Lakota Music Project*

#### WORKING WITH YOUR ORCHESTRA

The possibilities are limitless for how an orchestra can meaningfully engage its diverse community. But not just anyone can do this, nor do many orchestras have the time and staff to devote to such projects. These must be built in ways which are culturally sensitive, with patience and much listening. What I can offer is my experience in this kind of work along with many years of conducting our country's greatest orchestra, including the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra and Chicago Symphony.



# *Understanding the Process*

While every project is unique, Delta David Gier uses a three-phase template for understanding the process as a whole. Each phase builds on the next with the goal of fostering trust and long-lasting collaborative relationships between the symphony orchestra and local communities.

## **PHASE 1**

### **DISCOVER YOUR COMMUNITIES**

The process begins with Gier leading brainstorming sessions to identify ethnic, academic, and/or artistic communities for the symphony to engage.

## **PHASE 2**

### **BUILD YOUR BRIDGES**

By facilitating dialogue, Gier establishes vital ongoing relationships with community leaders, thinkers, and artists.

## **PHASE 3**

### **MAKE MUSIC TOGETHER**

Rich programs directed by Gier showcase the symphony's tradition alongside those of the community being served, with collaborations featuring artists from a variety of disciplines. The ongoing relationships forged through the process inspire more understanding and appreciation between the communities.



Delta David Gier has been called a dynamic voice on the American music scene, recognized widely for his penetrating interpretations of the standard repertoire and his passionate commitment to exploring new music and engaging new audiences. The Lakota Music Project, his innovative work in community engagement, has been recognized nationally for its impact. His passion is to both inspire and assist other orchestras to launch similar programs.

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