

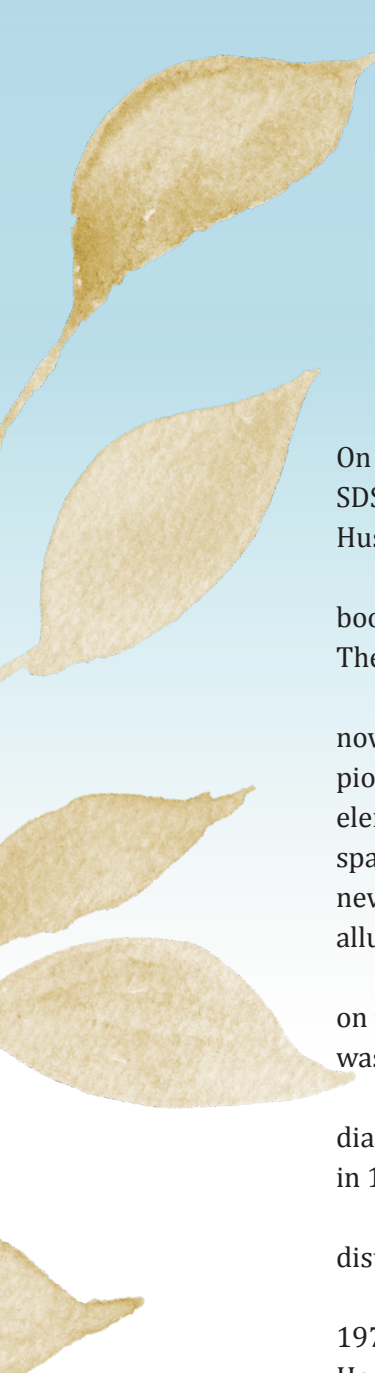


A GIANT AWAKENING

*South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Revives Pulitzer
Prize-Winning “Giants in the Earth” Opera*

By Keeley Ehrmantraut

When South Dakota Symphony Orchestra (SDSO) patrons enter the Mary W. Sommervold Hall on April 26-27, 2025, they will experience the usual orchestral phenomena. The lights will dim. Music Director Delta David Gier will raise his baton. The first notes of music will pierce the air. But, this will be no ordinary performance. The audience will witness history in more ways than one — come to life on stage through characters telling the stories of Norwegian pioneers and watching the SDSO make history by breathing life back into a nearly-vanished opera.



Beginning of the Odyssey



On Gier's first day in Sioux Falls in 2004, he met Dr. Art Huseboe, former SDSO president and well-known champion of the arts in South Dakota. Huseboe gifted Gier a copy of Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.

"Art said, 'If you want to understand people here, you need to read this book,'" recalled Gier. "He said, 'And, you know, there's an opera.'" The rest, as they say, is history ... or, perhaps, requires some.

It would be several years until Gier would read Rølvaag's novel — the first in a trilogy, which tells the story of a Norwegian pioneer family's struggles as they navigated the land and elements of the Dakota Territory. However, the novel would spark in Gier an ember of curiosity, as he wondered why he'd never before heard of an opera of the same name that Huseboe alluded to years ago.

"Then I researched the opera, and I found this diamond lying on the side of the road," Gier said. "Not only was it an opera, but it was by Douglas Moore, a famous mid-20th century opera composer."

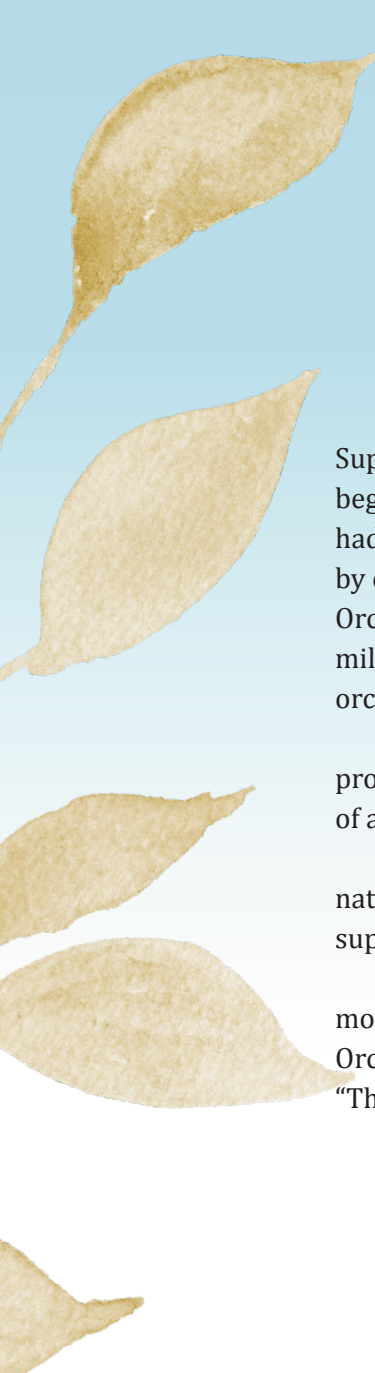
As it turned out, "*Giants in the Earth*" by Moore was more than a diamond on the side of the road. The opera won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1951, following its March 28 premiere at Columbia University.

"In no opera by an American is there music of such freshness, beauty, and distinctive character," wrote the Pulitzer Prize Committee.

Since then, "*Giants in the Earth*" has only been performed once — in the 1970s. This discovery fanned Gier's spark of curiosity into a red-hot flame. He was determined that this Pulitzer Prize-winning opera must come back to life on the Washington Pavilion stage, that the SDSO was the only orchestra that could rightfully take on this project.

"It makes all the sense in the world for us to tackle this piece of music," Gier said. "First of all, it really deserves to see the light of day. Moreover, it's who we are as South Dakotans; the story takes place exactly where we live. I know many people in this town who are related to Ole Rølvaag, who wrote the book. There's a real connection here." The connection, though, wouldn't happen without significant financial support.

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Compliments of a Music Critic



Support for “Giants in the Earth” came about in a nearly unbelievable way, beginning in the spring of 2022. The May 23 edition of *The New Yorker* had just been published. On page 66, an article entitled “Basin and Range” by classical music critic Alex Ross began: “The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, the musical pride of Sioux Falls, has an annual budget of \$2.3 million, which is microscopic by the standards of America’s leading orchestras.”

The following pages praised the SDSO for being “bolder and savvier in its programming than all but a handful of American ensembles” and “the model of an engaged orchestra.”

This laud caught the attention of a philanthropist and South Dakota native who wanted to help support the SDSO. After a few meetings, supporting the SDSO transformed into supporting “Giants in the Earth.”

“We had a commitment within the span of seven months of [the philanthropist] even knowing the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra existed,” said Jennifer Teisinger, executive director of the SDSO. “That’s really, really remarkable.”

Giants in the Archives



With both funding and encouragement secured, the SDSO was ready to move forward, especially Gier, who tracked down an orchestral score of the opera from Theodore Presser Company. Gier was also eager to hear a recording — only to learn that the sole existing recording, from the premiere performance, is archived in the Columbia University Libraries.

As Gier spent time at Columbia, focused on both the recording and the score, it became evident they were different versions of the same opera. The score, he learned, had been revised in 1963, which eventually led to a one-off performance of the revised version in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in the 1970s.

From there, Gier decided he and the SDSO would perform the revised 1963 version. “Moore revised it for a reason, so I’m assuming this is really what he wanted,” Gier said. “It’s tighter, it’s better. But, there are some

extended parts from the original that subsequent performers might be interested in, so I wanted those to be available to them.

“That led to the decision to create an appendix to the 1963 version which would include extra original material from the opera,” Gier continued. So, during a December 2023 trip to New York, Gier dug into the Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Columbia’s archives, determined to create an appendix.

“I spent a morning at Columbia taking pictures on my phone of all this extra material from the piano-vocal score that had been cut from the revision. I took a break, had lunch with people from the Douglas Moore Fund for American Opera and came back in the afternoon thinking I was going to do the same thing with the full orchestral score. When I went through the rest of the boxes of the ‘Giants’ material in the archive, there was no full score.”

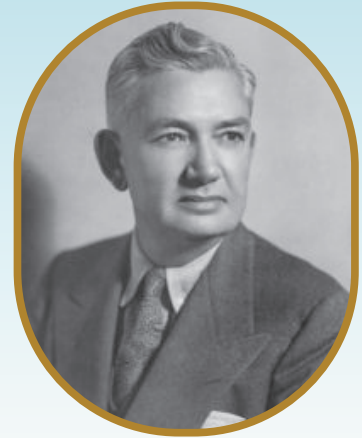
Gier quickly tracked down a librarian and asked for assistance. The librarian said the one person who could help would be Jenny Lee, Columbia’s curator for performing arts, who had since retired to Mexico. As Gier left the archives, discouraged, he called his friend from the Douglas Moore Fund simply to relay his conundrum.

“It turns out Jenny Lee used to be on the board of the Douglas Moore Fund, so my friend says, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll call Jenny in Mexico,’” Gier said. “Within an hour, Jenny had tracked down the score at the Music & Arts Library on Columbia’s campus. So, with the help of librarian Nick Patterson, we now have appendices. This is a historical opportunity, so we wanted to make this version as complete as we possibly could.”

The SDSO also worked to complete the opera by having the music engraved — the process of transferring the “chicken scratch of the composer into readable format,” explained Gier. The term “engraving” originated from the process of literally carving music onto metal plates. However, today, engraving is usually done using music notation software.

Gier didn’t just spend his long hours in New York in the Columbia archives; he also spent time at the American Opera Center in Manhattan auditioning more than 100 singers for 10 coveted roles. Joined by Bob Neu, stage director, Gier held another round of auditions in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and heard 30 more interested performers.

Gier and Neu called back a few performers, but both knew the top contenders as soon as they opened their mouths to sing. Before they knew it, “Giants in the Earth” had a cast. “We had 10 roles to fill, and we got the top pick for all 10 of them,” Gier said.



DOUGLAS MOORE

Eleven Covered Wagons



The singers and orchestra, in a semi-staged production, will bring to life the characters of Per Hansa, Beret and their children, as well as three other Norwegian immigrant families as they settle in the Dakota Territory.

For many who will sit in the audience, though, these are not just characters, but histories of their own families. This is especially true for Charles Berdahl, whose second cousin was Jennie (Berdahl) Rølvaag, wife of Ole Rølvaag. For Berdahl, the opera that will play out on stage will represent his family's story in the Dakotas — one that began more than 150 years ago.

It was 1873 when 11 covered wagons journeyed into Dakota Territory — nine families made up of 49 people, six horse teams, five oxen teams, 85 heads of cattle, eight colts and 30 sheep. The pioneers, who had emigrated from the Sognefjord region of Norway, arrived eight miles west of present-day Garretson, South Dakota.

The first years on the prairie — christened Slip Up Creek Settlement — were taxing and destructive. The pioneers faced crop loss the first four years from grasshoppers that came in swarms, and the “Big Blizzard of 1881” left a lasting impact on the region.

While devastating, the obstacles the settlers faced were documented by two members of the wagon train, brothers Andrew and Erick Berdahl, who kept journals where they carefully described their journey to Slip Up Creek and their homesteading experience.

These journals would be a source of inspiration for Ole Rølvaag, who married Andrew Berdahl's daughter, Jennie, in 1908. “Ole and Jennie and their kids would come for family reunions, and he heard the stories of the pioneers — the stories of Andrew and Erick,” said Charles Berdahl, who has been sharing his family's story for decades. “So, he decided he needed to write the story.


“I've never said that the book is the history of our family, but many actions originated in the Berdahl brothers' recounting of their personal experiences on the Dakota prairie,” Berdahl continued. “Rølvaag's creative imagination transformed these experiences into the powerful drama of *Giants in the Earth*.”

Berdahl believes that Moore's revived opera will not only be a retelling of his family's personal experiences, but a moment of reflection for all. “People can remember their family history and what that has meant to them,” Berdahl said. “It's not nostalgia. It's always to be able to look back to the past and look to the future. It's remembering our history, because then we'll look toward the future.”

This sentiment is carrying the SDSO forward as it balances excitement about the opera's revival and unease toward a missing piece of the story. While



OLE E. RØLVAAG



Rølvaag’s novel captures an important, friendly scene between the pioneers and Native Americans, Moore’s opera does not — most likely due to artistic license, length or clarity.

“How can we be the orchestra that created the Lakota Music Project to address racial prejudice and yet perform this opera about these immigrants coming and taking the land?” Gier said.

While wrestling with this question, the SDSO is looking toward the future, as Berdahl suggests, continuing its work with the Lakota Music Project — which was created nearly two decades ago and serves as a collaboration between Native American musicians and the SDSO.

Bringing Giants Back to Earth



The opera’s performances, happening in 2025, will align with the 100th anniversary of the publication of Rølvaag’s novel, as well as the bicentennial of Norwegian emigration to America — making this project even more special. The SDSO is not only ready to share this giant of an opera with the Sioux Falls community, but with the world.

“The performance and all of the ancillary events surrounding it are important, but the revival of ‘Giants’ is for posterity as well,” Gier said. “The reason this opera has not been done since the 1970s is because people haven’t been able to hear it or see it. Putting this out there means this opera can now be seriously considered by opera companies, orchestras and other arts organizations for future productions. In the end, it’s not so much about us at the SDSO as it is about what the resurrection of this opera can mean for the music industry and arts world.”

And, resurrected it will be. South Dakota Public Broadcasting (SDPB) will film both performances of “Giants in the Earth” to create a television broadcast for its channel.

The broadcast will later be available on SDPB’s website, too. The SDSO plans to offer an audio recording of the opera on all music streaming services. The only way to experience history live, though, is to purchase tickets to the opera. Because when those lights dim, Gier raises his baton and the first notes of music pierce the air, “Giants in the Earth” will find its rightful place back in front of an audience and the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra will bring to life an opera with an unbelievable past and beautifully unknowable future.

“If there is anything that history makes clear it is this, that when a people becomes interested in its past life, seeks to acquire knowledge in order better to understand itself, it always experiences an awakening of new life.”

— OLE E. RØLVAAG

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