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MAJOR GIFTS

Performing-Arts Groups Work to Attract Big Donors After the Pandemic Downturn

Organizations are asking board members to step up, appealing for planned gifts, and emphasizing community-outreach programs.

By *Maria Di Mento*

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Emanuel Black Bear, keeper of the drum, starts off a performance of the Lakota Music Project at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., in 2019.

It's not often that a performing-arts organization lands a major gift without first courting the wealthy donor, but that's what happened to the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra. Last year, retired Waste Management founder Dean Buntrock and his wife, Rosemarie, pledged \$2 million, after just a few months of discussions. It's the symphony's largest gift to date.

Buntrock was born in Columbia, S.D., but has lived in the Chicago area for decades and was not aware that South Dakota had a professional symphony orchestra. That changed when he read a *New Yorker* article about the Sioux Falls group's wide-ranging music programming last year. Impressed by how much the orchestra was accomplishing both inside and outside the concert hall on a \$2.3 million budget — tiny compared to most top orchestras — Buntrock decided he wanted to learn more. He called a well-connected relative in Sioux Falls, former U.S. Congresswoman Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, who currently serves as president of Augustana University.

“He calls Stephanie and he goes, ‘What’s up with the South Dakota Symphony? They do all this on a \$2.3 million budget? What would they do if they had \$4 million?’ So Stephanie calls me and tells me this, and I’m thinking, man, that guy’s singing my song,” recounts conductor David Delta Gier, the orchestra’s music director.

Herseth Sandlin introduced Buntrock to Gier and other orchestra officials that August, and in January the organization announced the Buntrocks’ pledge. Buntrock issued a statement that made clear why he was so impressed after learning more about the orchestra.

“The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra is a tremendous asset for the state of South Dakota and has been doing great work with a small budget,” Buntrock said in the announcement. “It is my hope that the initiatives funded by this donation will advance the work of this wonderful orchestra and its adventurous programming, making it available to many more people in the state.”

Many performing-arts organizations are struggling to recover from significant financial shocks brought on by the pandemic and audiences’ slow return. Against that backdrop, the Buntrock gift illustrates how thoughtful community outreach programs, along with traditional artistic offerings and creative forward-looking new ones can attract wider attention and support from wealthy donors. Performing-arts fundraisers and leaders are spotlighting their onstage and offstage offerings to attract big donors and remind them why the performing arts matter.

At the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, those outreach programs include the Lakota Music Project. The program aims to address South Dakota's history of racial tension by building connections and cultural understanding between the state's white and Indigenous populations through music collaborations between the symphony's musicians and musicians from the Oglala Sioux and Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate tribes. The orchestra's musicians also hold music-composition seminars for grade-school students on reservations and collaborate with the students to create chamber-music pieces that the orchestra's musicians then perform.



SOUTH DAKOTA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Jennifer Teisinger, executive director of the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra

Gier also has partnerships with musicians at South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota and has used choral groups from both universities in some of the orchestra's larger concerts. Some of the orchestra's musicians have formed a string quartet and a wind quintet and regularly play smaller concerts at local hospitals, schools, and behavioral health centers.

Big-Gift Fundraising Tips From the Arts That Any Cause Can Put to Use

Many performing-arts groups were hit hard by the pandemic and audiences' slow return. To make up lost ground, fundraisers at those organizations are working hard to win big gifts. What they've learned

has the potential to help major-gift officers at all types of nonprofits.

Get back to basics.

Each wealthy donor is different, says Sharon Duncan, director of individual giving at Dance Theatre of Harlem. She says it's important that fundraisers really get to know who each donor is beyond what your prospect researchers learn about them. Find out how often they want to hear from you and in what ways, and then make sure that you're checking in with them accordingly. If they're open to it, create special ways to stay in touch with them, whether with written updates, phone calls, or site visits, if appropriate.

“So often we go in with that whole spiel, and we never even take time to listen to what they might be interested in,” Duncan says. She recommends giving potential donors enough information to understand the overall mission and then tailoring communications to their specific interests. “It's those touch points that are going to be meaningful to them, and that comes out of conversations you have with them. “

Fundraising for major gifts right now is about getting back to the basics, says Elizabeth Rouse, CEO of ArtsMemphis. She says fundraisers need to spend more time with big donors face-to-face, if they are open to it, and have more frequent and in-depth communications with them.

“In a way, that is now easier because we all faced such challenging times that you had to have some of these crisis conversations in the beginning of the pandemic,” Rouse says. “That really built more awareness and opened the door to more intentional conversation with donors.”

Be gracious.

When you talk to donors, be transparent and keep them informed, even if you have bad news to share, Duncan says. If a donor decides to stop supporting your organization, be kind and understanding, she says. Tell them you're sorry to hear it and ask them if you can still send them information about what's happening at the organization from time to time. If it seems appropriate, Duncan advises that fundraisers ask donors if you can share information in the future about planned giving.

“You still stay a friend at Dance Theatre — and, in some instances, a friend of mine — and that's really critical,” Duncan says. “If something changes in their lives, we have to understand that. There's no guarantee we're going to get the gift every year.”

Think big.

When it comes time to ask for a substantial gift, be bold and honest, says Gregory Robertson, chief philanthropy officer at Houston Grand Opera. Don't just ask for what you think a wealthy donor might be willing to give, he says. Instead communicate what your organization really needs and lay out the specifics of what it could do with a big gift.

“We tend to be more reticent and think that the smaller we ask, the more likely we are to be able to

get the gift, but people can't read our minds," Robertson says. "People don't know what we know about our hopes and dreams and what we want to build for our organizations and the difference we can make in our community."

Big donors are often surprised to hear about all of the work the orchestra does outside the concert hall, says Jennifer Teisinger, the orchestra's executive director

"When you think of a symphony orchestra, you think about them playing Beethoven or world premieres of living composers," Teisinger says. The South Dakota Symphony does that and does that well, she says, but for some donors, it's hearing about the string quartet performing for foster kids or the wind quintet performing for adults with special needs that really moves them. "That's the impact that donors are surprised to hear about it. It doesn't make the news, and it doesn't sell tickets so it doesn't get talked about much by the organization. But it's those things that are an impact and resonate with donors."

While community programs can attract major gifts over time, Gier stresses that performing-arts groups must develop them carefully, for the right reasons, and with the right input.

"It's about actually being relevant," he says. "When people see that, they respond well. They can tell where the heart of the organization is."

Embattled Sioux Falls banker Denny Sanford pledged \$2 million in September to support the orchestra's educational programs for children, another big donor attracted by the orchestra's community programs. His gift will be paid over five years. The Buntrock donation will be paid out over the next four years; it is being used to increase the group's fundraising and marketing efforts, pay for additional concerts by the Lakota Music Project throughout the state, and support a revival of *Giants in the Earth*, a 1951 Pulitzer Prize-winning opera based on a novel about Norwegian immigration to South Dakota. With the Buntrocks' blessings, the orchestra will use about \$50,000 of the gift to match donations from other donors to its annual fund.

The organization received the first installment of the Buntrock money in January. Part of it went toward hiring the organization's first-ever development director, who started in August, and will work with Teisinger to broaden the organization's donor base. While Teisinger's team is in the early stages of mapping out extensive fundraising and marketing plans, it has hired outside marketing help to get it started on some of the basics.

Before the gift, the orchestra couldn't afford to mail marketing materials to households beyond its Sioux Falls ticketing base. The newly hired marketing firm is helping to identify new potential patrons and donors, and to expand the orchestra's direct and digital mail campaign to households within a much wider radius beyond

Sioux Falls. So far, the orchestra has seen a 7.6 percent increase in season subscriptions and a more than 8 percent increase in revenue from last season, says Brandy Hartman, the orchestra's marketing manager.

Weekly Check-ins With Donors

Many performing-arts groups in Memphis are having a slow comeback post-Covid, but there are bright spots, too, says Elizabeth Rouse, who leads ArtsMemphis, a grant-making organization that supports dozens of local arts groups.

"One of the best things that's come out of COVID is that every arts organization we work with is now thinking differently about their art form," Rouse says. "It's not just about what they're producing on stage — although that's certainly still part of the equation — it's why their art form and their organization is important to Memphis."

At Tennessee Shakespeare Company, community programs extend into Memphis schools, a veterans' hospital, and the city's juvenile-justice system. Founder and artistic director Dan McCleary says they've been a part of the theater company's focus since he started the organization 16 years ago.

"We've never looked at ourselves as just a professional theater; we're really a service provider," McCleary says. "That means our work extends past performance. It's in education, it's in outreach, it's in training and facility rental, so we're always able to talk about something."

And talk he does. McCleary says he keeps the group's major donors informed weekly about what's happening internally, financially, onstage, and in its outreach programs. McCleary started the regular check-ins during the pandemic because he wanted to ensure donors didn't feel like they had to go searching for answers about how the theater company was faring. He says he has continued the practice because it helps donors understand how the group operates and helps them feel like they're part of all the organization is doing.

The theater provides its actors with specialized training so they can work with school-age youths. One program called Poetic Justice teaches young people in juvenile detention centers how to use the example of Shakespeare and other writers to express themselves through poetry. Their writing is then recited by professional actors and recorded or performed on stage for the young people. In surveys participants report that the program has improved their literacy and provides a weekly, familiar presence of a supportive and creative adult.

Another program, the Romeo and Juliet Project, uses Shakespeare's famous story of doomed young lovers to teach high school freshmen how to envision and practice making better life choices, including how they might escape involvement with armed violence, and push back against peer pressure, prejudice, and poor

guidance. The program also teaches students how to articulate their feelings, and increase their empathy and compassion for others.

While McCleary can't bring donors into the detention centers or schools, he can tell them how the numbers play out: how much money the theater spends to train its teaching artists, how many schools they go into, the number of young people involved, and how it all translates into helping local youth.

"Then I'm able to say to a prospective donor: 'This is all great, however I can also get us into these 16 other schools, and here's what it's going to take in terms of transportation, in terms of additional training, and in terms of additional materials. But here's the end result: we're moving English language scores up by an average of one full letter grade.'"

McCleary believes keeping donors informed and explaining what those programs are accomplishing gives them a deeper sense of involvement and has helped with fundraising. The organization raised more in its 2022 and 2023 fiscal years than before the pandemic. Tennessee Shakespeare Company now has the largest operating budget it has ever had, more than \$1 million.

Asking Board Members to Step Up

Dance Theatre of Harlem landed two very big gifts in recent years, a \$4 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2020, and its largest donation to date, \$10 million from the philanthropist MacKenzie Scott in 2021. Those donations provided a historic windfall, but the storied ballet company is working harder than ever to create a pool of new affluent donors who will hopefully remain loyal supporters well into the future. These days that's not an easy task, says Sharon Duncan, director of individual giving.



ROBERT ALTMAN, WORKS & PROCESS AT THE GUGGENHEIM

Dance Theatre of Harlem in Nyman String Quartet #2, choreography by Robert Garland

“The performing arts are wonderful,” Duncan says. “We know they still are, but there’s health care, there’s the environment, there’s education, there’s human rights. There’s just so many other causes that we’re vying for their attention, and so it’s a challenge.”

The ballet company used the Scott gift primarily to build up its endowment and directed a smaller portion of it to building and infrastructure improvements and artistic and community programs. The organization has operated a wide range of community outreach efforts since its founding 54 years ago, including in public schools in New York and elsewhere. However, its current fundraising focuses less on highlighting outreach programs as a way to attract major gifts. Instead the organization is asking trustees to step into the fundraising fray more than in previous eras.

A portion of the Mellon grant pays for salary increases for dancers and staff, artistic programming, and outreach efforts. It will also support a new effort that challenges Dance Theatre’s board members to deepen their fundraising efforts by bringing in new affluent donors who have the potential to turn into long-term

supporters. Of the \$4 million the New York troupe received from Mellon, \$1 million is being used to match gifts from other donors the board recruits by 2025.

Donations that come in through Dance Theatre's annual gala don't qualify for the Mellon match, so Duncan and her team have created smaller, more personal events tied to small performances by the ballet company. One is an intimate dinner before the ballet company's annual "Works & Process" performance and panel discussion at the Guggenheim Museum. Board members can invite one or two friends to the dinner, where they can get to know the organization's chairman and other leaders, learn more about the organization, and then attend the Guggenheim event.



COURTESY OF SHARON DUNCAN

Sharon Duncan, director of individual giving at the Dance Theatre of Harlem

Board members have also been asked to organize their own events. For example, one board member who lives in Washington recently invited 15 of her friends to a Baltimore performance where the ballet company performed with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Board members have also brought potential donors to the organization's Harlem headquarters to visit the ballet company's affiliated ballet school, or to attend "Thursday@DTH" a public outreach program where visitors watch the ballet company's rehearsals and attend a question-and-answer session with the dancers and choreographers afterward.

Events led by board members have raised more than \$640,000 so far, and Duncan says she has no doubt the organization will complete the Mellon challenge by the deadline. The company is doing well — it raised nearly \$4 million in the fiscal year that ended in June. The hard part, Duncan says, is the long-term cultivation she and her team must do — now and in the future — to hold onto the new donors its board has brought in.

“It’s our job to follow up and really take the time to get to know the individuals that the board brings to us and to keep them beyond a dinner or one performance,” she says. “It’s: How do we keep them interested in Dance Theatre and grow their support with the hope that they will become major donors to the organization in the next years.”

A Transformational Gift

Keeping major donors engaged and encouraging them to increase their giving is more important than ever for performing-arts groups, says Dan Cooperman, chief advancement officer at Opera America, a membership organization that serves opera companies, educational institutions, and opera-affiliated businesses.

“There’s greater urgency on major gifts and there’s a lot of things working against us, but nevertheless, we persist,” Cooperman says. “It’s still a matter of finding the people that have that affinity for you and that capacity and building those personal relationships.”

Houston Grand Opera has attracted support from some of its bigger donors by asking for multi-year commitments and talking to them about endowment and planned giving, says chief advancement officer Gregory Robertson. He says his team has transformed its thinking from an annual-giving mindset to a multi-year, long-term major gift mindset.

The group landed its biggest single gift to date earlier this year when longtime supporters Ernest and Sarah Butler gave the opera company \$22 million. The gift will go to the endowment and to create a new fund within the endowment to provide long-term support for the opera’s Young Artist Vocal Academy, a training program for talented opera singers at the undergraduate level.

Robertson says the Butlers started giving to the group in the 1980s but never more than a few thousand dollars a year. Then, about 10 years ago, they endowed a chorus master and a concertmaster position. Robertson and his team got to know them better and learned they care about young artists and providing arts groups with financial stability.

“That was extraordinarily helpful, because then we started thinking about larger opportunities for them to make a difference,” Robertson says. “We just stayed in touch with them over the years and talked to them

about different opportunities and what a transformational gift could be long term.”

He says his team plans to have more conversations with major donors about supporting the endowment over the next three to five years. Having those conversations is easier now, he says, because the pandemic impressed upon big donors how fragile most arts groups are.

“If we want to have great art in our community, great music, great dance, the only way we can ensure that is making sure that companies have the financial resources to do that,” Robertson says. “We’re very much focused on having conversations with our donors about the importance of legacy-giving in their estate plans, but also the opportunity to make current gifts to the endowment because that’s the only way long-term companies weather bad things.”

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MAJOR-GIFT FUNDRAISING

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Maria directs the annual Philanthropy 50, a comprehensive report on America’s most generous donors. She writes about wealthy philanthropists, arts organizations, key trends and insights related to high-net-worth donors, and other topics.

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