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MacKenzie Scott's multimillion-dollar message: Art is essential everywhere, not just in museums and theaters

By Sarah L. Kaufman
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Philadanco of Philadelphia performs at a 2019 event hosted by the International Association of Blacks in Dance, which received \$3 million this year from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. (Scott Robbins/Geek With a Lens)

When she got the phone call in May about a \$3 million gift from billionaire MacKenzie Scott, Denise Saunders Thompson, president of the [International Association of Blacks in Dance](#), fell on the floor.

Then she got up to dance.

“I think I did a couple of turns and a few kicks,” Thompson says, “and I definitely did a leap, for sure.”

It was “one for the ancestors,” she says in a recent phone interview, reflecting on this award in light of IABD’s three decades of preserving and promoting the works of Black dance artists. Helping ballet schools and out-of-work artists survive was, for obvious reasons, tougher than usual this year, until now. Thompson’s D.C.-based nonprofit was one of seven dance institutions to receive large, unasked-for funds in the most recent round of donations by Scott and her husband, Dan Jewett.

The gifts, which [Scott announced in June](#), totaled \$2.8 billion and went to nearly 300 recipients across the country, many of them arts and cultural organizations serving communities of color, as well as two- and four-year colleges and universities. Particularly impressive is the range of arts groups and their geographic spread, from nationally known New York-based institutions like Apollo Theater and Jazz at Lincoln Center to regional entities such as Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans and Boston's Theater Offensive, dedicated to queer and trans art.

The donations are astonishing, and not only because millions of dollars flew into bank accounts seemingly unrestricted, with no strings attached. "We encouraged them to spend it however they choose," Scott wrote in a blog post about the gifts. Given the experience of the groups she selected, she's left it to them to "know best how to put the money to good use."

Nor is the chief surprise that many of those millions went to organizations led by and serving people of color and groups that are commonly overlooked and underfunded. On a par with those extraordinary moves is Scott's broad, generous concentration on the arts in the first place, especially amid a global pandemic.

Museums, musicals and violin lessons aren't usually top of mind for donors in times of crisis, when so many other pressing needs crowd the landscape. Yet there she is, giving to the Alaska Native Heritage Center; the East West Players, devoted to Asian American theater, and Play on Philly's music education for schoolchildren. To many, Scott gave the largest unrestricted gift they've ever received: \$20 million to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; \$10 million each to Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballet Hispánico. Alonzo King Lines Ballet received \$5 million. Urban Bush Women, IABD and Collage Dance Collective each received \$3 million.



Dancer Adjii Cissoko of the Alonzo King Lines Ballet. The San Francisco-based group received \$5 million from Scott. (RJ Muna)

Of course, Scott has the wealth to support any and all causes she wishes. She is one of the world's richest women following her 2019 divorce from one of the world's richest men, Amazon founder (and Washington Post owner) Jeff Bezos. [According to Forbes, her net worth is nearly \\$55 billion.](#) With Jewett, [she has vowed to give away most of her fortune.](#) She's donated nearly \$8.6 billion in the past year.

Surveying [her pattern so far](#), you can see that her arts donations fit into a larger plan. They're part of a thought-out picture that began coming into focus last year. With her eye on underserved and marginalized communities, Scott announced her first gifts in July 2020, spotlighting groups devoted to public health, economic mobility and racial, gender and LGBTQ equity.

Next, she gave in December to those working in communities with food insecurity and high crime rates.

With this third set of gifts, Scott is signaling — to the world, to other donors — that she views dance, theater, music and other arts, correctly, as part of a larger system promoting social good and helping to fix problems of inequity, disease, crime and hunger.

Her message, says Jeannie Infante Sager, director of the Women's Philanthropy Institute at Indiana University, is "I'm funding the arts, and it's important because it's connected to a larger systemic issue and it lifts the community."

Jacqueline Ackerman, the institute's associate research director, calls it "systems thinking." Bringing about change by shoring up key parts of a system.

"MacKenzie Scott is not just saying she likes the arts," Ackerman says. "She has really connected it back to the long-term impact of that giving."

Scott said as much in describing her recent gifts and her intentions. "Arts and cultural institutions can strengthen communities," she wrote, "by transforming spaces, fostering empathy, reflecting community identity, advancing economic mobility, improving academic outcomes, lowering crime rates, and improving mental health."

She could have been describing the past year at the IABD. When covid-19 restrictions forced the dance field to shut down, Thompson says, she and her staff worked harder than ever to raise funds for the dance community's unemployed. After George Floyd's murder, they persuaded businesses that claimed solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter to put up money for Black dancers, dance troupes, schools and students.

King, of the San Francisco-based Lines Ballet, says that Scott and Jewett are "smart givers" for recognizing such work.

"They gave to the mothers," he says. "These organizations are like mothers, multitasking and replenishing the energy of the youth and the community. They have targeted organizations that are steeped in giving, in systems that already provide for others. And so with these gifts they'll be able to continue to reach out to more people, to do more and do better."

He hopes governments and funding leaders pay attention to Scott's community-building message about the arts. Since the arts "give you the opportunity to see yourself and the world in a different way than television and media do," they're a counterweight to negative thinking and behaving, he says.

"Communities are built up of individuals and if those individuals like themselves, if they have discovered there's something inside them that's larger than their small ego, they are expanded," King says. "They are deeper feeling and thinking people. And that's what changes a community."

He and his staff are studying how best to use Scott's money, to sustain Lines Ballet and extend its collaborations and its educational programs. The funding "came at a critical time," he says, letting out a deep laugh. "It's miraculous."

There is a kind of fairy-tale aspect to Scott's giving. It's full of mystery. Other than her three blog posts on Medium, she has made no other statements and did not respond to Washington Post requests for an interview. Those around her are similarly quiet. Her advisers include the Bridgespan Group, a national nonprofit (to which she has also donated) that advises charities and philanthropists, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Beyond confirming the relationship, a Bridgespan spokeswoman wrote in an email, "We do not discuss our clients or their processes."

The grant recipients were initially contacted by unassuming email with no hint of who was behind it. Thompson says she sat on hers for a week, thinking it was a scam. Scott's name didn't come up until the end of the process, but there was no direct contact with the philanthropist.

"We never spoke to MacKenzie Scott or her people," Thompson says. "We had no idea it was her until we were actually awarded."



Collage Dance Collective performs "Swan Lake." Scott gave \$3 million to the Memphis-based ballet company. (Ariel J. Cobbert/Collage Dance Collective)

Leaders of Collage Dance Collective, a professional ballet company and a school based in Memphis, were also left mystified. “I don’t know how it happened,” says Executive Director Marcellus Harper. When he first got the email requesting some background information “on behalf of a potential anonymous donor,” Harper didn’t put much stock in it.

“We submitted some materials,” he says, “thinking maybe at best we’d get \$100,000.” When a woman called to tell him the amount of the gift, “it was an out-of-body experience,” Harper says. “I don’t know what she said next. Probably lots of useful stuff I don’t remember.” The shock was intense since his group is far from any dance epicenter, with a small, overtaxed staff, and has had trouble getting noticed by major donors.

He hopes Scott’s largesse leads to “a shift in how we’re viewed.”

Collage is one of the youngest dance groups on Scott’s list, founded in New York in 2006 by Harper and Kevin Thomas, a principal with Dance Theatre of Harlem. They saw it as a way to carry on the legacy of Dance Theatre’s founder Arthur Mitchell, a pioneer in showcasing Black ballet dancers. Thomas and Harper moved to Memphis a year later, hoping to have a larger impact there than in New York’s crowded field. They were right, Harper says. (The company will perform at the Kennedy Center next spring.) But though Collage has grown in its 15 years, breaking into the funding community has been challenging.

“Particularly for an arts organization of color, and an emerging arts organization of color, navigating the philanthropic matrix, all the protocols and the politics, can be daunting,” Harper says. “Who gets funded depends on relationships, and not having access to those historically makes it difficult and can be discouraging.”

With the closing of theaters, arts academies, workshops and rehearsal studios, the pandemic has blown up the business model of so many arts groups, particularly in the performing arts. Michael Kaiser, chairman of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland, says in the past year he has advised more than 600 arts groups worried about their futures. A former executive director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, he has worked with many dance organizations of color. What’s especially notable are the sizable funds going to these groups, he says.

“Transforming our arts ecology into a more equitable one is not going to happen with modest gifts,” Kaiser says. “We need to allow some really wonderful but under-resourced organizations to do work that’s large-scale and gets people seeing them and hearing about them. That’s what this money allows them to plan for now.”

The unrestricted nature increases the value of the gift. Scott left it all up to the imagination of the creatives themselves.

“If you talk to arts leaders, that’s the most amazing money you can get,” Kaiser says. “You can spend it on salaries or fixing the electrical system in your warehouse, things that are not sexy but are really critical to maintaining a healthy organization.”

Like King and Thompson, Harper isn’t sure what Collage will do with the money. They’re still in strategic planning. What’s clear is that while the financial boost is tremendous, and much needed, it’s the gift of trust — in the organization’s work and leadership — that may have the longest lasting effect. Trust has an inestimable value. “I can’t say we’re building a million-dollar ‘Swan Lake.’ Don’t hold your breath for that,” Harper says, laughing. “But if we can get someone like MacKenzie Scott to say, ‘I vetted this organization and I trust them,’ that will make others trust us more easily.”