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Business funds arts

By ANN REISEFELD

Our Capital Bureau
WASHINGTON — In Moline, Ill., concert pianist Barbara Nissman gives a series of 30-minute performances in the cafeteria of John Deere & Co., a manufacturer of heavy farm and garden equipment. The noon concerts, paid for by the corporation, are free for the 300 lunching employees.

— In St. Louis, guards at the St. Louis Art Museum are taught to handle visitors with tact and friendliness.

— The cost of seven training sessions is underwritten by the Measuregraph to Measuregraph, which makes light industrial machinery, believes that a less forbidding atmosphere will draw bigger crowds to view the city's art treasures.


— In New York City, a spokesman for Mobil Oil Corp. last year gave more than $7 million to arts and cultural programs. Ten years ago, Mobil's corporate contribution to the arts was near zero.

Across the country, it is clear that business support of the arts is growing. The past decade has brought an 800 percent increase in corporate arts contributions — from $27 million in 1967 to $216 million in 1976.

A dozen corporations last year each donated more than $1 million to the arts, and most American businesses supported at least one arts program. In 1976, the arts received almost 12 percent of the total corporate philanthropic dollar — up from less than 3 percent in 1965.

One force behind the tide is the well-known but prestigious Business Committee for the Arts. A private, tax-exempt, national organization, the committee was formed in 1967 to encourage businesses to support the arts and to promote the idea that it's a good investment.

President Goldwin A. McLeLLan said in an interview that the committee is largely responsible for the spurt in its donations.

McLeLLan and others agree, however, that a major share of the credit belongs to the National Endowment for the Arts, the federal government's arts funding arm. The endowment's annual budget also has grown.

And McLeLLan is quick to note that the greatest share of the corporate philanthropic dollar goes to museums, followed by public broadcasting and symphony orchestras. Grants to individual artists are at the bottom of the list.

McLeLLan concedes that "business tends to feel uncomfortable with the avant-garde, but it is less cautious today than 10 years ago."

In the end it comes down to public acceptance. If a dance company is performing nude and nobody comes to see it, it won't get corporate support. But if people are breaking down the doors to get in, it will be funded.

Critics also warn that corporate support could lead to corporate control and that funds could be withdrawn if a corporation disapproves of a donor's output. As an example, they cite the recent move by Dow Chemical to cut off funds to a Midwest university that sponsored a speech to the students by actress Jane Fonda.

Miss Fonda took the occasion to blast big business in general and Dow in particular.

McLeLLan asserts that potential federal arts cuts is not a problem. Businesses are too busy running the company.

Curt Slover of the National Endowment for the Arts agrees. "The Jane Fonda incident is an isolated case," he says. "I know of no one in the corporate world with a personal inclination to dictate content."

It is perhaps ironic that as arts institutions gain money, they're finding need for outside support increases.

"The more they grow the more they need," says McLeLLan. "There are no labor-saving devices available to the arts."

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BCA's low-key, business-like approach seems to work well with corporate executives. "It's terrific," says Rosborough. "They can offer over 2,000 ideas that have already been implemented."

In fact, BCA regularly publishes a booklet containing examples of how companies support the arts. The most recent edition, released last May, lists 2,507 examples in 22 categories.

A perusal of the 38-page booklet reveals that more than 20 companies now promise to match dollar for dollar or more, contributions by employees to their favorite arts institutions. Many of the nation's finest art collections are now owned by corporations. Some of the collections contain works by masters such as Alexander Calder and Henry Moore others consist mainly of works by developing young artists.

"We encourage businessmen to decorate their offices with works by local artists," says Emil Hess, BCA member and chairman of the board of Parisians, a Birmingham, Ala., department store. As a result, notes Hess, who is president of the Birmingham Symphony Association and chairman of the Alabama School of Fine Arts. "Birmingham has a large number of quality artists.

Time Inc., Ciba-Geigy Corp. and others sponsor free admission programs for employees to their city museums. J. Aron & Co. and the House Co. are among those that provide their workers with tickets to local ballet and symphony performances.

"We realize the importance of the arts not only in the community but also in the lives of our individual employees," explains David C. Farrell, chief executive of the May Co., which has headquarters in St. Louis. "So we try to sponsor the arts not just in community museums and orchestras, but also in our own employee community."

Still other companies bring entertainment to the factory premises. Atlantic Richfield sponsors a concert series in the roof garden of its parking facility. Security Pacific National Bank brings performing artists to its lobby.

Though corporate arts funding is generally applauded, it is not without critics. Some are quick to say that most of the funds go to well-established museums and orchestras rather than to experimental projects. In fact, BCA surveys show that the...