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## Flora Thornton dies at 96; L.A. philanthropist and arts patron

**The USC School of Music bears her name. Among her many activities, she was a member of the LA Opera board and helped establish its young artist program.**

By Dennis McLellan, Los Angeles Times

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Flora Laney Thornton, a longtime Los Angeles philanthropist and patron of the arts who was the namesake of USC's School of Music, has died. She was 96.

Thornton died Friday of pulmonary disease at her home in Holmby Hills, her family said.

A Kansas native who arrived in Los Angeles in 1948 with her first husband, Litton Industries co-founder Charles B. "Tex" Thornton, she was a major donor to numerous Southern California institutions, from the Library Foundation of Los Angeles to the USC/Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center.

But she is best known for her contributions to the musical culture of Los Angeles.

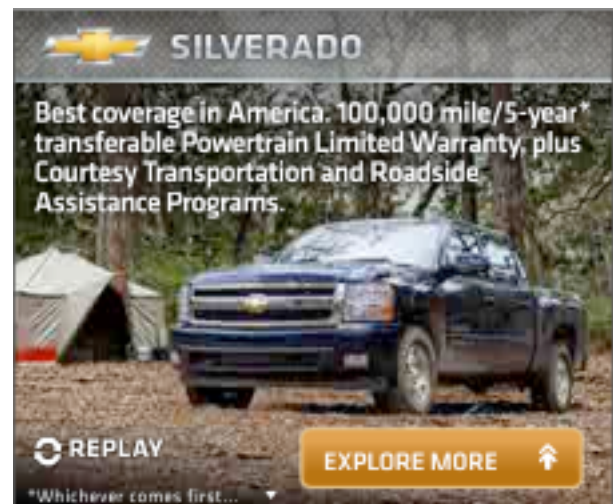
Thornton had already been involved in scholarship programs for USC music students in 1999 when she donated \$25 million to the university's School of Music, the largest donation to a school of music in the U.S. at the time. In recognition of her gift, the USC Board of Trustees voted to rename the school in Thornton's honor.

In 2006, she donated an additional \$5 million to help fund a new music building on campus.

"Flora forever changed the artistic landscape of Los Angeles," said Robert Cutietta, USC Thornton School of Music dean, in a statement Friday. "First as a role model and secondly as a philanthropist. Personally, she radiated and exemplified what it means to be truly cultured as a human being."

Thornton's "manner and action," Cutietta added, "were always refined and in the best of taste. As a philanthropist, she propelled Thornton School into the top echelons of music schools in the world. She

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has made a similar impact on the L.A. Opera."

Indeed, Thornton was known as a generous supporter of Los Angeles Opera, of which she was a life trustee and a Founding Angel.

Thornton, who joined the opera's board in 1989, helped Placido Domingo establish the Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program in 2005 with a \$2-million donation.

"Identifying and encouraging talented young artists with enormous potential is essential to the future of opera," Thornton said at the time.

Domingo, the company's general director, said in a statement Friday that the Young Artist Program "could not have been created without her extraordinary vision and generosity."

"She was one of LA Opera's most cherished friends, and I think that it is wonderful that this program, bearing her name, will continue to benefit future generations of opera audiences as well as the future success of LA Opera."

Thornton served on the Music Center's Blue Ribbon support group and the Music Center Board of Governors. She was also a leadership donor to Walt Disney Concert Hall.

In addition, she served nine years on the board of Santa Fe Opera and contributed scholarship funds to the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara.

In April, Thornton was among those honored by the L.A. County High School for the Arts in recognition of their contributions to the school and to the arts.

Opera singer Marilyn Horne, who had known Thornton for more than a decade, read the tribute to her at the event and sang "Simple Gifts."

"She was certainly a great money tree, but it wasn't just that — it was her great love of the arts that was so important," Horne told The Times Friday. "The arts have certainly lost a great friend."

Thornton had a lifelong love of music.

She was born Flora Laney in Independence, Kan., on Nov. 1, 1913, and later moved with her family to Fort Worth. She attended Texas Tech University, where she majored in nutrition and clothing design. But she loved to sing and was a soloist in her church choir. At 22, she moved to New York City to study voice.

She performed in two Broadway musicals, "May Wine" and "White Horse Inn," before marrying Tex Thornton in 1937.

As her husband devoted himself to business, she mostly relegated her love of music to listening to jazz and opera records.

"Women had different roles then, and we played them," she told The Times last year. "My husband didn't care much about music. We therefore didn't go to many concerts. We rode horses."

But after he died in 1981, she said, "life went on in a different way."

As she said in a 1985 Times interview, "My life is very different.... To be busy and to have new things to do is rewarding."

Among her numerous activities: serving a seven-year term on the Library of Congress Trust Fund Board and serving on the board of regents at Pepperdine University, where, among other things, she established the Flora Laney Thornton Professorship in Nutrition and the Flora L. Thornton Endowment for the Opera Program.

Thornton and her second husband, Eric Small, whom she married in 2005, also supported National Multiple Sclerosis Society programs and established the Eric Small Centers for Optimal Living for people with MS and similar challenges.

She is survived by her husband; sons Charles and Laney; seven grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. Wednesday at All Saints Church, 504 N. Camden Drive, Beverly Hills.

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