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— Janis Price



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Janis Price, 57, has played music nearly her whole life, starting with piano when she was five years old. But in the fall of 2009, the guitar was still something of a mystery to her. She had been playing for only a couple of months and was struggling a bit with the new challenges that were completely unlike those of the piano. Yet, instead of holing up in her living room to practice until she felt more confident, she did something totally unexpected: she packed up her guitar and sheet music, headed into downtown Los Angeles, and set up outdoors to work through the new techniques.

Twice a year, Active Arts® at the Music Center invites recreational musicians to the Music Center campus for a 30-minute outdoor practice session called Public Practice. There are no rules about what participants can and cannot play, and mistakes are more than welcome.

“I looked at it as a way to make the time to practice, because I’m always so busy,” explains Price, a legal secretary. Having participated in Public Practice three times, she’s found that bringing her music outdoors helps her to focus. “Playing out in public encourages me to approach things a little bit differently. Even though it’s not a performance, knowing that I might have observers helps me to organize my practice session,” she says.

On the other hand, Eric Oto, a saxophonist and two-time participant, has occasionally found himself sidetracked during an outdoor sessions—but in a good way. “The acoustics were so fascinating that I ended up, for a little while, just strolling around the campus plaza listening for different sounds,” says the 48-year-old lawyer. “Hearing the sounds bouncing off of the granite, concrete, and everything else outside was really interesting, and it got me to think a lot more about sound production, rather than just technique.”

For the most part, though, people just happening to pass by the two-block campus during Public Practice sessions are at the best advantage to enjoy the notes in the air, mixing with the environment. “We organize it so that several musicians are playing concurrently in different areas of the campus,” explains Ming Ng, director of Active Arts. “So, there is a ‘soundscape’ that is created as you walk from one musician to another.”

Like exhibits in a museum, the participating musicians are set up with signs next to them, explaining who they are and what they are doing. Once in a while, people will stop to listen or to ask the musicians a quick question, but some don’t quite know what to make of the situation. “One man tried to drop a dollar into my saxophone case,” Oto recalls with a laugh.

Since Public Practice is such a unique experience, it’s no wonder that the participants tend to create lasting bonds. The relationships begin outdoors on the Music Center campus, when one musician might stroll up to another to sight-read through some duos. At the end of project, everyone takes part in a group dinner and discussion, and the relationships often extend far beyond that day. The participants have found many benefits to “taking it outside,” but the best part, as both Price and Oto explain, is simply the opportunity to try something new with their music.

—Meredith Laing, *Making Music Magazine*