

Fine Arts Lunch Breaks debuts with live music in downtown San Bernardino

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Violinist Laura Rosky-Santori performs for a small crowd outside the San Bernardino County Justice Center on Thursday in San Bernardino. Rosky-Santori, along with cellist Ana Maria Maldonado, performed to kick off of a new Fine Arts Lunch Break program called Wednesdays on the Plaza where each month a new group will provide musical ambiance for courthouse employees and passerbys. MICAH ESCAMILLA — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By [Michel Nolan](#), The Sun

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Violinist Laura Rosky-Santori, left, and cellist Ana Maria Maldonado, of the San Bernardino Symphony, perform for a small crowd outside the San Bernardino County Justice Center on Thursday in San Bernardino. The duo performed to kick off of a new Fine Arts Lunch Break program called Wednesdays on the Plaza where each month a new group will provide musical ambiance for courthouse employees and passerbys. MICAH ESCAMILLA — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Just imagine — leaving your office in downtown San Bernardino and walking to a nearby restaurant for lunch, when you hear the rich dulcet tones of a cello-violin duo.



The beautiful live music seems to be coming from the open-air plaza at the Justice Center on Third Street.

OK, you say, “but how can this be?”

The music is a free gift to passers-by — a downtown midday arts experience to go with your soup and sandwich.

A welcome break in your busy day.

The San Bernardino Symphony is spearheading the new program, Fine Arts Lunch Breaks, which provides a fine arts experience in San Bernardino during workweek lunch hours.

The goal of the program is to improve the perception of the city for those who work here, but don’t necessarily live here.

On Thursday, the inaugural Fine Arts event featured a cello-violin duo performing a lovely combination of classical and popular pieces.

The orchestra’s Principal Cellist Ana Maria Maldonado and violinist Laura Rosky-Santori performed the uplifting selections in the plaza as pedestrians lingered to listen under the shade of a big blue awning.

A little girl and her grandmother found chairs a few rows back.

Eight-year-old Kalie Mason and her grandmother, Wini Orum, were in town from Hesperia.

Kalie, who is a violin student, sat entranced.

She likes playing classical music best, she said shyly.

Kalie started playing the violin a year ago, but has been playing the piano since she was 5, said her grandmother, who also is a violinist.

Even better, Kalie’s 80-year-old great-grandmother still plays the violin for the Victor Valley College Orchestra.

Other people sat at tables under another awning, munching and listening to the music.

Stephen Silvius drove in from the north end of town to have lunch at the center and enjoy the Fine Arts Lunch Break.

“I rolled in for it,” he said. “I grew up here in San Bernardino and recently moved back from D.C. You’ve got the most beautiful building in town and you’ve got the San Bernardino Symphony, which is absolutely amazing and many people still don’t know about this high-caliber symphony.”

Stephen said every city he’s lived in, including Baltimore, is experiencing a resurgence of their downtown.

“The misperception of San Bernardino’s downtown is that it is dangerous, and it’s not.”

Michelle Faxon, who works in the nearby District Attorney’s office, enjoyed a sandwich at another table.

“We just heard about this today,” she said.

“The Justice Center makes a nice lunch venue and the music is nice and relaxing, a good break from a hectic day.”

If all you know is work in downtown San Bernardino, the idea of enjoying the arts for a few minutes does sound like a delightful diversion.

Dr. Anne Viricel, the orchestra’s executive director, explained the concept.

“There are thousands of people here, transacting business, who never think of the city as a place for the arts. Hopefully, people will open their eyes,” she told me.

The program is made possible by a grant from the Irvine Foundation — one of the few arts grants it awarded this year, according to Viricel, who has served as the orchestra’s executive director for three years.

The \$66,000 Irvine Foundation grant continues over two years, and will feature three fine arts events each month — all at lunchtime in different downtown venues.

The San Bernardino Justice Center will be the site of one event each month, usually on Wednesdays except for Thursday, Oct. 20.

The Justice Center Lunch Breaks are being called “Wednesdays on the Plaza.”

“We will have San Bernardino Symphony musicians and all sorts of other artists to schedule,” Viricel said.

“Before the end of the year we will have a polka band, a guitarist, a poet/fiber artist, a string trio and cello duo. We’re excited because San Bernardino Valley College has students coming out for this program also — it’s really a coup for the city.”

She called it a win-win-win.

Next up, on Sept. 28, is artist Phil Yeh and a violin duo featuring orchestra musicians Todor Pelev and Tom Sender.

To get the wheels of the project in motion, Viricel worked with some of the city’s great arts groups — the Fine Arts Commission, the Arts Connection, San Bernardino Symphony people and representatives from San Bernardino Valley College. The city has been fantastic, waiving any fees, she said.

Viricel is excited about the project because it is indicative of a sea change in San Bernardino that’s clearly leading toward an outstanding future, she said.

The Fine Arts Lunch Breaks concept was the idea of Judge Cynthia Ludvigsen, chairwoman of the Court-Community Outreach Committee.

Two years ago, after the opening of the Justice Center, she had invited Symphonie Jeunesse Youth Orchestra for Strings to perform in the open-air plaza at the Justice Center.

“Ever since, I tried to encourage the court to have concerts there, but the court didn’t have the staff. So, when Anne found the grant, it was perfect — the seating, shade and tables,” the judge said.

“This is a beautiful setting for a noon lunchtime with music. I hope this will make the building part of the community.”

Other settings will include Court Street Square for the Third Thursdays food truck event, and well-traveled venues throughout downtown.

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