

Pianist, poet and artist team up on fund-raising show

ADRIAN CHAMBERLAIN Times Colonist Victoria

It's a pretty safe bet if Victoria's Heather Burns is involved, the show will go on. On Sunday, the pianist teams up with poet Carla Funk and artist Rose Cowles-Martin for "Christmas in the Box". It's an unorthodox evening of music, poetry and painting -- sometimes happening at the same time. Proceeds go to Sanctuary Youth Centre.

Burns has a reputation as a super trouper; at least in theatre circles. It's mostly connected to a single incident. Burns kept playing the piano for *Wizard of Oz* in 2005, even after breaking her arm. It happened with three weeks left on the 104 performance run at the Chemainus Theatre Festival. Burns, who was staying in Chemainus, went for a run. She tripped on a stump, fracturing 2 bones in her right arm. The doctor bound her in a splint rather than a cast, thus allowing her fingers to move a little. "It was a challenge, I had to continue playing the show with one hand," Burns said. "I played the odd note with my right hand. I developed a really good left-hand technique."

On Sunday night, a fully recovered Burns and her band will play Christmas and other music. At various times, Funk (Victoria's former poet-laureate) will simultaneously recite, while Cowles-Martin paints a canvas on stage.

"Whatever's in my brain comes out and it's enhanced by the music and poetry," said Cowles-Martin, a graphic artist and children's book illustrator. Burns said the trio first teamed up for an African awareness fundraiser in February. She and Cowles-Martin had collaborated on stage several times previously. The music-poetry-art combo "isn't too common," Burns said. "We're trying something new. Every time we've done it, we've gotten amazing responses."

Well-known in Victoria as a music director and accompanist for theatre, Burns has cut 2 solo discs. The latest, *Road Back Home*, was released in November 2008. To record this collection of original compositions and Christmas songs, Burns decided to rent the perfect grand piano. She embarked on a comprehensive hunt. She and producer, Joby Baker, tried out 40 pianos before deciding on a battered grand. The piano, located at a local music store, appeared an unlikely candidate. It was worse for wear, even missing its sides. Burns was told that it was used for British Columbia's 150th birthday concert at the legislature earlier that summer with Sarah McLaughlin and Feist. Apparently the instrument was damaged in transit. "We sat down and played it and thought this will be a waste of time. And it was the one." Burns ended up buying the piano, which was repaired. Because she lives in a condo it's now resides at Baker's studio.

She's something of a prodigy. Originally from Courtenay, Burns started playing the piano at age 3. When she turned 17, armed with a Grade 10 from the RCM, she successfully auditioned to be accompanist for a youth choir that toured Europe for three months. The transformative experience of performing and visiting such countries as Poland, France, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland convinced Burns to become a professional musician. After graduating high school, the teen moved herself to Los Angeles to study jazz at the Grove School of Music. A master's degree in piano performance from Western Washington University followed.

While Burns loves playing concerts, she enjoys it more if they support a greater cause. "Being a part of a bigger picture and collaboration resonates with me," she said. "I tap into that stuff where I can."

achamberlain@tc.canwest.com