

## Musician's project invites people to play music in City Hall parking garage

BY JEANNE CLAIRE VAN RYZIN - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF



That a parking garage could be an impromptu performance venue doesn't seem an absurd proposition to Austin musician and composer Steven Parker.

After all, like a subway station platform, a parking garage is a utilitarian public space in which many people come and go at all hours. And if in many metropolitan areas busking musicians transform subway platforms into performance space for passers-by, couldn't a parking garage hold the same potential?

Parker suggests it's worth a try.

*One of the instruments made of ordinary materials and some parts of instruments by Steven Parker. The instrument is one of several in Parker's "Recycled Sounds" project, which places the playable instruments at various locations in Austin City Hall's parking garage through May 31.*

“Though Austin’s growing, there’s still not much of a pedestrian culture here unfortunately,” says Parker, whose principal instrument is the trombone. “We’re always in our cars. And there’s a lot of under-utilized public space in Austin even though public space is more and more a precious commodity.”

A couple of weeks ago, in tandem with the recent Fusebox Festival, Parker launched his “Recycled Sounds” project, placing large, whimsical, fully playable instruments throughout the parking garage underneath Austin City Hall, staged at different levels near the open central staircase that descends from City Hall Plaza.

Made of common materials such as PVC pipe, miscellaneous hardware, duct tape, balloons, metal light shades and lumber, along with bits and pieces of actual instruments (bridges from stringed instruments, parts of a French horn, drumsticks, mouthpieces), Parker’s instruments will remain in place until the end of May.

“Recycled Sounds” is an invitation, Parker explains.

“I’m not trying to signify what people should be doing with them,” says Parker. “I like not knowing what people might be doing with them.”

That the vaguely anthropomorphic instruments surprise is as much the intention as anything else.

“I’m more interested in how encountering them might provide a sense of discovery for people, challenge them to relook at their (urban) environment or consider it in different ways.”

Last year, Parker staged a similar project in Philadelphia when he was artist-in-residence at that city’s Asian Arts Initiative center. Working with a group of youth from the community, he built instruments that took root in an alleyway that spanned several important blocks in Philadelphia’s rapidly changing Chinatown North neighborhood.



*Austin musician Steven Parker, on the steps of Austin City Hall Plaza, with one of the instruments made from simple materials such as PVC pipe and lumber, part of Parker's "Recycled Sounds" project. Parker's instruments are installed in the City Hall parking garage through May 31.*

For "Recycled Sounds," Parker likewise incorporated a youth element. He spent five weeks teaching composition, improvisation and the mechanics of instrumental sound-making to the students of Austin Soundwaves, the collaborative music program of Hispanic Alliance for the Performing Arts and the University of Texas College of Fine Arts that offers intensive free classical music education to low-income students at the East Austin College Prep charter school.

Experiments percolated in those workshops helped shape the “Recycled Sounds” instruments, though Parker roped in fellow instrument-makers Travis Weller (of Austin’s New Music Co-op) and Jebney Lewis to help design and build what’s in the City Hall garage.

Austin Soundwaves students performed during the project’s kickoff concert last month.

Parker jokes that being a trombonist provides him with plenty of time to think, especially about music.

“I know it’s a cliché to compare an orchestra to a football team,” says Parker, who teaches at the University of Texas-San Antonio. “But trombonists are like the punters of the orchestra. There’s a certain athleticism to playing the instrument. But then we’re mostly idle until a few brief moments when we’re counted on to play perfectly.”

Like many musicians of his generation, the 30-something Parker thinks a lot about how so much classically grounded music performance has exhausted its audience — especially a younger audience — with its constraining social formalities and its rigid programming.

“It’s a ritual that has lost its original meaning — it restricts the actual artistic experience of the music you came to hear,” says Parker. “Music must be living.”

While finishing his doctorate at UT-Austin a few years ago, Parker was appointed the composer-in-residence at the Blanton Museum of Art, the museum’s first. He founded the now enormously popular “Soundspace” series — musical happenings that take place throughout the museum’s galleries in a kind of roving concert.

For one “Soundspace” concert, a clarinetist played John Cage’s “Sonata for Clarinet” in the museum’s elevator. For another, Parker rallied 80 trombonists who performed Henry Brants’ massive piece “Orbits” in the Blanton’s soaring atrium. “Soundspace” netted the 2012 Austin Critics’ Table Award for Best Chamber Music Performance.

Next month at the Contemporary Austin-Laguna Gloria, Parker will stage an environmental music piece, positioning a dozen trombonists around the lagoon while the music is cued via flags from a raft.

Once done with City Hall, the “Recycled Sounds” instruments may move to other downtown locations, again to await encounters with passers-by.

Parker is open to possibilities. “The (instruments) could be in all kinds of places,” he says. “The point is for people to be surprised.”

“Recycled Sounds”

When: Through May 31

Where: Austin City Hall parking garage, 301 W. Second St.

Cost: The project is free. Parking is \$4-\$13.

Information: [www.steve-parker.net/](http://www.steve-parker.net/)

To see a video on the “Recycled Sounds” project, go to [www.austin360.com/arts](http://www.austin360.com/arts)