

(Right)
PLNU musicians play
alongside members
of the Cuban National Band.



Making History: Our Band in Havana

When Dan Nelson visited Cuba in December with his PLNU Jazz Band, conducting the Cuban National Band wasn't on the itinerary. The trip to the Havana International Jazz Festival, Dec. 16-23 came at the invitation of the Cuban government.

PLNU's was the only big band in the festival's lineup, the only university group, and the only Americans.

The chance to direct the government music group of one of the world's most closed nations came after the festival. Nelson said he was told that they were the only American group that has performed in Cuba since the United States imposed travel restrictions.

Everywhere the Americans went people asked them how they had been allowed into the country. "We met many, many journalists—mostly from Europe—who asked, How did you get in?" said Nelson.

The group was excited to worship at a well-attended Methodist church, the Iglesia Metodista de Universitaria, in downtown Havana. Nelson was

Other examples: some of the musicians used the same reed on their instrument for a year. Upon learning of that, one PLNU player took out her \$40 box of reeds and handed it to her Cuban counterpart, said Nelson. Students left behind \$300 in reeds and valve oil, another rarity.

The band was invited by the Cuban government's minister of arts and culture. Students raised funds and sought donations for the \$42,000 needed for the trip.

The experience was organized by the Global Missions Project, a Georgia-based nonprofit organization which focuses on music as a means to cross-cultural experience and ministry. Nelson hopes to return to Cuba in the future.

The band, eighteen students from Point Loma plus one from the University of San Diego and a player from Kansas City, played three times in three days, all to standing ovations, said Nelson.

The band even developed a following. "A group of



PLNU Jazz Band vocalist Melissa Simmons and Jon Titterington, on the piano, perform in the Havana International Jazz Festival at the Casa de Cultura de Plaza.



Cuba children share a laugh with PLNU student Paul Aubrey, a member of the band, from USD.

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stunned to see that the 2 1/2 hour service in this state-recognized church included a baby dedication, a commissioning of a missionary to Belize, and an altar call to which seven people responded. He said the sermon clearly conveyed "heart holiness."

During a part of the service called "family time," a woman came up to Nelson and said with a hug, "In our church everybody's family."

"We experienced that sort of warmth over and over," said Nelson. "We fell in love with the people. They were friendly and glad we were there."

He said he was impressed by the dedication of the Cuban musicians, especially when faced with a severe lack of equipment. The national band had no music stands, only handmade racks. "We left them our music racks," said Nelson, about 20 of them.

people followed us from one venue to another," said Nelson. The group also received invitations to perform at other jazz festivals, even one in Belize.

The trip was a bridge-building exercise, Nelson believes, and he is certain it will open doors in the future. He saw the power of that during the last stop.

In Cancun, the band was invited to play a public concert. Their contact, a Southern Baptist missionary, rented a theater from a woman Nelson described as a Cuban communist. She told them they could only use the venue if they didn't mention God, although they were allowed to play Christmas tunes.

Afterwards, she told the missionary that if other groups would be the same caliber as the PLNU's band, he could bring anyone to perform he wanted to.

Another door opened.