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Berklee adds a Braille beat

Students testing program for blind

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Wayne Pearcy, a Berklee College of Music student, sits hunched before a console buried under a mountain of keyboards, wires, computer monitors, and microphones. A thin 23-year-old Louisianian with strawberry-blond hair, Pearcy is enthusiastically explaining his plan to write the next number one hit single.

"I'm making the next big pop hit," the trumpet performance major says. "I will have Christina Aguilera at my door."

He is simultaneously reading lines of music from a sheet in his lap, composing two drum segments to accompany the bass line he has just finished, and cracking jokes about the merits of bubble gum pop. Behind him, two other students sit at identical desks, counting quarter rests and adding hi-hat cymbal fills.

They are finishing a composition lesson, though none of the students can see a single note they have written.

Pearcy and his classmates, all of whom are blind, are the first students to test a new program that aims to make a Berklee education more accessible to blind and visually impaired students, who have been applying to - and enrolling in - the school with increasing frequency. In an effort to improve their experience, administrators have developed a new curriculum and a state-of-the-art lab to go along with it. A former and current student, both of whom are blind, are running this summer's pilot program, which will be offered as a for-credit Berklee class starting in the fall.

"We're really just trying to give students with blindness or visual disabilities the same opportunities as sighted students," said Bob Mulvey, the associate director and disabilities service coordinator at Berklee's Counseling and Advising Center. "We've always had blind students and they've always had a positive experience at Berklee, but it hasn't been equal to the sighted students. We want to give them as many options, musically, as we can."

For several years, both students and administrators like Mulvey had advocated for increased access for blind students, but they had seen little progress. That changed in the spring of 2009, when the school brought in consultants for a daylong seminar on music study for blind students. After that meeting, Mulvey's office spent six months planning a proposal for the pilot program. When Berklee's president, Roger Brown, gave his approval, the team immediately began working, and barely a year after the initial meeting blind students gathered in a second-floor lab to read music for the first time.

Now, more than halfway through the five-week program, which meets for four hours daily, Tuesday through Friday, the five test students are comfortable around equipment and tasks that were unfamiliar to them when they began.

In the lab, they focus on three main skills: notation, music composition, and reading Braille music. Their lessons range from reading a line of Braille music and singing the notes, to composing a piece for multiple instruments by listening to the screen reader, which narrates text that appears on laptop screens.

While there are still some areas where the students' inexperience shows, the mood is lighthearted and supportive, and students and teachers seem to be enjoying themselves. Most of the students plan to take the course when it is offered in the fall, and the school intends to offer it in the future to all incoming freshman who are blind.

The teacher, Chi Kim, a pianist and songwriter who graduated from Berklee with a dual major in songwriting and contemporary writing and production, returned to his alma mater to teach after completing a master's degree in music technology at New York University. During his years at Berklee, Kim, 28, had to teach himself many of the programs and skills that are now offered in the course. On the recommendation of a former professor, he returned to Berklee to help design the curriculum and supervise technology purchases.

"I just came and we planned this whole thing," he said. "I started getting involved last summer - my job was to create a whole new curriculum so they can learn this technology."

In addition to the music and technology skills, Kim is enthusiastic about teaching Braille music. After losing his sight at age 3 in an accident during heart surgery, Kim learned Braille as a child in his native

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South Korea. When he moved to the United States during high school, his Braille literacy placed him in a national minority. Braille literacy among the blind in America is declining due to advancements in technology, but the Berklee instructors say blind musicians have few other options for reading music.

"It's very important to know how to read Braille music, because there's no other way to read music for blind people," said Ozgur Altinok, a student who is acting as Kim's teaching assistant for the summer course. "You can hear the music, you could follow the music on your computer, but you can't read the music. You basically need to touch the paper and feel the dots. That's the only way."

Like Kim, Altinok learned to read Braille music before entering Berklee. He's a 27-year-old violinist and music production and engineering major who arrived at Berklee with a degree in music education from a conservatory in Turkey. He hopes to teach in a school for the blind someday.

"It's really exciting," he said. "Lots of things are going to change. Other schools hopefully are going to start these kinds of things, or we're going to be an example for them."

Pearcy, who was raised by two blind parents and has been blind since birth, came to Berklee in the fall of 2007. Though he could graduate next year, Pearcy intends to stay and remain involved with the new program.

"I don't want to leave just yet," he said. "I've still got work to do here. It means a lot to me. It's something that's been needing to happen at Berklee for a really long time and I want to be in the thick of it, completely."

He paused, like a jazz player inhaling before a high note. "I don't want to miss a beat of it."

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Credit: Natalie Southwick, Globe Correspondent

[Illustration]

Caption: Wayne Pearcy listened to a voice translator during Berklee's test program. Dina Rudick/Globe Staff; Anton Sviridenko, a first-semester student at Berklee College of Music from Malden, was part of the summer test program for visually impaired students using adaptive technology. Dina Rudick/Globe Staff

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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