



TAKING NOTES

Piano class offers a break from a steady diet of math, science and engineering courses. But it also provides students with some unexpected challenges—as well as some welcome rewards.

Students, left to right, Andrew Key, Adrian Wilson, Bharath Munirajulu, Chase Cannon and Deeksha Lal had varying reasons—from fulfilling lifelong dreams to play a musical instrument to finding a creative release from their studies in fields like electrical engineering and computer science—for signing up for an introductory piano class.

BY BILL KRUEGER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BECKY KIRKLAND

Deeksha Lal came to NC State to study electrical engineering. It's why she spends eight hours a day, five days a week, designing radio transmitters in a lab on Centennial Campus. Andrew Key studies calculus and neutrons because he wants to be a nuclear engineer. Bharath Munirajulu came to NC State to do graduate work in computer science. They are serious students pursuing serious studies.

Yet on a rainy day last fall, Lal, Key and Munirajulu—along with 17 other students majoring in everything from nutrition science to business administration—could be found sitting at upright pianos in a cinder block room on the ground floor of Broughton Hall, struggling to play “Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore.”

They come, twice a week for a semester, because they want to explore something that has nothing to do with engineering or computers or calculus. A few of them have at least some experience playing a musical instrument—high school band, childhood piano lessons, etc. But many have never played an instrument and don't know how to read music. “For a long time I have dreamed of learning piano,” Munirajulu says, “but never got enough time.”



Students come from all over campus to meet in the basement of Broughton Hall twice a week for Class Piano I.

And so they signed up for Music 107, or Class Piano I. Over the course of the next few months, many of them will find the creative connection they are seeking. Others will find that the piano can be every bit as complex as calculus or computer programming. “In engineering, I guess it’s only one half of the brain at work,” says Lal, who’s in her second year of a combined master’s/doctoral program in electrical engineering. “I find this a little more difficult. In engineering, you get a concept and you can learn it in a half an hour. Here, you need a lot more practice.”

The first class starts promptly when professor Olga Kleiankina (pronounced clay-YON-keen-na) walks into the room at 12:25 p.m. “Hi. How are you? Find

your headphones. Please check that your headphones are working.” Room 1404 in Broughton Hall is equipped with state-of-the-art pianos—the result of a grant that Kleiankina secured not long after she arrived at NC State in 2009—with headsets that enable 20 students to learn at the same time without the distraction of hearing each other. Kleiankina can listen to any student in the room by flipping a switch on a control panel, or she can flip another switch to let the students see a projection of the keys on her piano moving as she demonstrates a song.

Kleiankina has yet to introduce herself, although in some cases it isn’t necessary. Some of the students have Googled her and found that she is a world-class pianist who was born in

Siberia, raised in Moldova and trained in Romania before going on to earn a doctorate in piano performance and pedagogy at the University of Michigan. At most universities—or at least those that offer majors in music—a teacher of her pedigree would not be teaching a beginning piano class.

But music has always filled a special role at NC State. Because the university does not offer a music major, it would be easy to assume that music education is little more than an afterthought at a place where science and technology dominate. But no less an authority than Chancellor Randy Woodson, a plant scientist who happens to play a pretty mean guitar, considers music classes such as Class Piano I one of the “coolest things” about the university. Because NC State doesn’t have a music major, he says, “it opens up the world of music to other students.”

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

Over the course of the semester, the students in Class Piano I will learn the basic concepts of music theory, keyboard techniques and how to play melodies with simple chords. They’ll learn to read music, learn to play with both hands, and eventually play a song from memory in public. Kleiankina tells the class that she expects them to practice at least 15 minutes a day in addition to the 50 minutes they spend in class every Monday and Wednesday. “You need to develop muscle memory,” she says.

They start without touching the keyboards. Kleiankina holds up her thumbs for the class to see. The thumbs are always number one, she says, assigning numbers to their fingers that will correspond to the notes in the first songs they play. She counts down the other fingers as she extends them from her palm. “Everybody, hands up,” she says. She calls out numbers



Professor Olga Kleiankina, above, guides students in the basics of notes and rhythm. Student John Paul Sullivan, left, and his classmates struggle to keep a simple rhythm covers while Munirajulu, above, and Lal, below, focus on one of the first songs they were asked to play.



“IT DOES SEEM TO GO PRETTY FAST SOMETIMES. I JUST HAVE TO WORK HARDER.” —ADRIAN WILSON, PSYCHOLOGY



Wilson, above, struggled through parts of the class but never lost his enthusiasm for music or the satisfaction that came from figuring something out. “This was great,” he said after the final class. “But it was different. I had to work for it.”



for the fingers she wants them to wiggle as they hold their hands in the air. She keeps it simple at first—No. 2 on the right hand, or No. 3 on the left hand. Then she calls out combinations for both hands. “Two left and three right,” she says. “Just feel where your fingers are. Do you feel them?” There’s plenty of nervous laughter as students look around to see if others are having as much difficulty as they are. It doesn’t matter. Kleiankina is ready to move on, to talk to them about notes—whole notes, half notes, quarter notes. “This is the only math you need to know in music,” she says.

Then it is time for the students to try their first song, a simple three-note melody called “Two by Three.” With their headphones plugged in, the only sound in the room is the dull thuds of fingers pushing the keys down, over and over, like large drops of rain falling on a rooftop. That, and the exasperated pleas of the students. “I’m so confused,” one student confesses. Rather than listen in through her headphones, Kleiankina relies on her eyes as she walks around, watching her students’ fingers. She stops to adjust a student’s hands or point out a note in their instructional book. “Not bad for the first time,” she says after a few minutes.

“Good job. Do you want to learn one more song?” It’s not so much a question as an indication of what’s coming next.

By the second class, part of Kleiankina’s approach becomes apparent: She introduces material at what often seems like a frantic pace—tacitly challenging her students to keep up—but then finds ways to reinforce earlier instructions as she moves forward. If students are struggling, she gives them a few minutes of personal attention in class while prodding them to practice more outside of class. “It does seem to go pretty fast sometimes,” says Adrian Wilson, a junior majoring in psychology

who wants to learn to play nine different instruments. “I just have to work harder.”

When it’s time for the students to use both hands, Kleiankina tries to keep it simple, asking them to pull the cover over their piano keys and bang out a few beats using their right and left hands. “What are we doing?” cries one student. “Oh, my God,” says another student. At some point, their difficulty becomes almost comical. Kleiankina laughs along with her students as they struggle with the assignment.

One of those students is Chase Cannon, a junior majoring in business administration who is a walk-on on the Wolfpack

basketball team. But his athletic prowess is not coming in handy, so to speak, in the piano lab. “Coordination is kind of an important thing when you play basketball,” he says after class. “But this is something I’ve never done before. It was definitely challenging.”

LESSONS LEARNED

By the second week, though, there is a more confident air about the room as the students come in early and get in a little practice before class begins. The collective pounding on the keyboards is

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—CHASE CANNON, BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION



Cannon, left, says the class was more challenging and more rewarding than he expected. “I would definitely say I’ve gotten better than I thought I would coming into it,” he said. “I plan to keep playing.” His book bag, above, is a reminder of one of his other passions—basketball.

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—JOHN PAUL SULLIVAN, BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

less tentative and moves along at a quicker pace. Students spend less time looking to others for guidance. For Lal, at least, it is because she has spent at least an hour a day practicing outside of class. “I’m actually spending more time on the piano than on my other courses,” she says. “It’s very exciting. I never realized until I started piano how much we neglect our left hand.”

Lal has also discovered some parallels between music and science. “It’s been fun learning how to read music,” she says. “I always thought it was gibberish. But I realize there’s a lot more symmetry to music. It’s almost scientific that way, logic and symmetry. I find it very close to science.”

Music, Kleiankina argues, can be even more challenging and, in the end, more rewarding. “In math, you can learn the material and start solving the problems,” she says. “The answers are very clear—you did it right or you did it wrong. With music, it’s so complex. You can play it right, but it wouldn’t be beautiful. Or you have so much soul in your playing, but some technical aspects would be missing. With music, there’s always room for perfection.”

As the semester progresses, the students work on everything from correct posture on the piano bench to the importance of finding middle C on the keyboard. Students continue to struggle playing with both hands, but Kleiankina is not worried. “This method is designed in such a way that any beginner should do fine,” she says. “Over time, they will all catch up.”

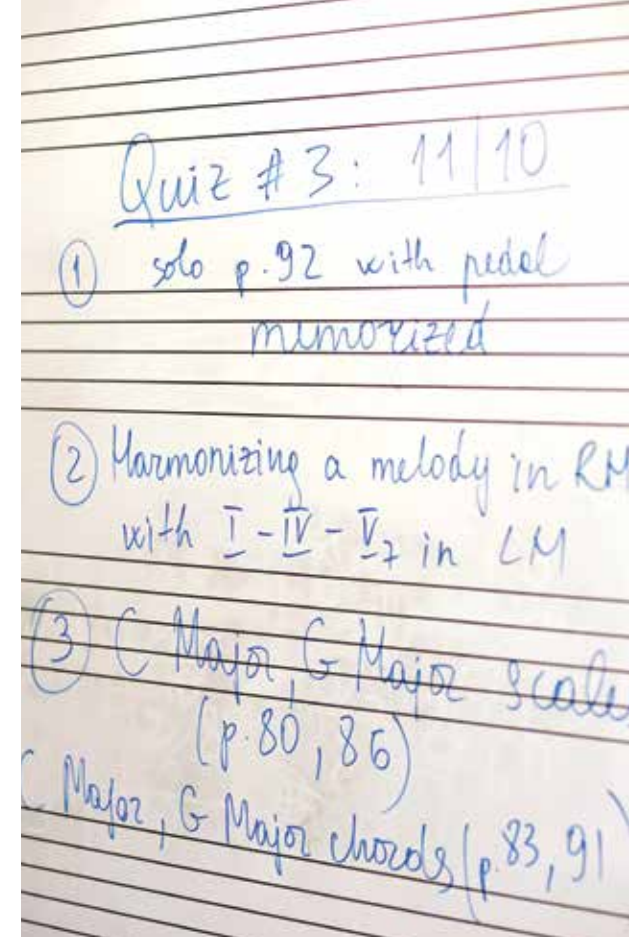
Three weeks into the semester, Kleiankina directs the students’ attention to the SmartBoard at the front of the room. She plays a black-and-white, grainy video of Louis Armstrong and his band performing “When the Saints Go Marching In.” Munirajulu is beaming as he watches.

The students will be expected to play the song, from memory, as part of their first quiz in a couple of weeks. They will also be expected to play C and G major five-finger scales and transpose a simple melody using the C and G positions. Kleiankina encourages her students to sing along—either to themselves or out loud—as they play. “When you are humming along, your mind knows what notes are coming up and how the rhythm of those notes go, so it helps your hands go along with the beat,” says John Paul Sullivan, a senior majoring in business administration.

The performances on the day of the quiz are all over the board. Kleiankina makes her way around the room and

watches each student as they attempt the song and the other pieces. When it comes time to play the solo, a few students reach for their books before Kleiankina reminds them they are expected to perform it from memory. Other students struggle to play the C and G major scales. “Don’t you remember how it is?” Kleiankina asks one student.

At the end of the class, Kleiankina tells the students to practice the A major and D major scales before the next class. She also expresses her disappointment in the performance of a few of the students. “We still had people who couldn’t play scales three times up and down,” she says. “Why do we do it three times? We do it to train your hands.”



Munirajulu, above, signed up for the piano class to get some relief from his graduate studies in computer science. “It’s a stress relaxer,” he says. Key, below, had not played an instrument since he played the flute in middle school. “I had forgotten completely how to read music,” he says. “I can figure out any song now.”



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—DEEKSHA LAL, GRADUATE STUDENT, ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING



Lal found herself torn between the hours she needed to devote to her graduate work in electrical engineering, above, and practicing piano outside of class, right. “When I would come from my lab and go to music class for that one hour, I was working an entirely different part of my brain,” she says.

DIFFICULT READING

Over the next few classes, the students take on a new challenge. “Today, we’re going to do a new thing—sight reading,” Kleiankina tells them. “It’s the ability to read a new score at first sight. Analyze the score. Look at the top note and the bottom note for each hand’s positions. Tap the rhythm with the fingers. Look at the accidental signs—flats, sharps or naturals. Tap the piece out on the keys. Then PLAY!”

But Kleiankina’s short burst of enthusiasm is lost on her class. They are struggling with a critical building block of reading music—the ability to correctly identify the notes.

“This one is D?” one student asks, pointing at his sheet of music.

“It is not D,” Kleiankina responds. “We just talked about this.”

Kleiankina asks another student about a note on the sheet.

“F?” asks the student, whose face is flushed as she struggles to figure out the notes.

“F has to be on the line,” Kleiankina says. “It’s G.”

The next class is more of the same.



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—PROFESSOR OLGA KLEIANKINA



A handful of students came to a faculty recital that Kleiankina, above and left, gave on campus during the semester. “I always wanted to perform,” she says. “I always wanted to share.”

Kleiankina says at the outset that she wants to spend five minutes reviewing scales but ends up spending the entire period walking around the room and correcting problems. “You just skipped a note,” she tells one student. “You have to be able to find the position. You need to be put the fingers in the right key. Practice that. Do you practice scales a lot? You need to practice them. You’re not going to play the piano if you don’t do this.”

At the end of the class, Kleiankina says she is going to postpone the next quiz until after the upcoming fall break. “A lot of you need to practice a lot,” she says.

Following the quiz (a mixed bag of results), the class turns its attention to playing in C scale and G scale, chord progressions and playing harmonization in C major and G major. The students also are expected to play increasingly challenging songs, all from memory. Kleiankina says it is the toughest part of the semester. “They will probably all struggle,” she says.

But she gives the students a taste of what’s possible, performing snippets of some of the songs she wants them to play. Key breaks out in a smile, and Wilson chuckles to himself in amazement. “It’s beautiful,” Wilson says later. “Her fingers are just so nimble. It’s like, ‘Wow, I can’t do this.’ And she’s talking while she’s doing it. It’s just like second nature, or first nature, or whatever. She just has it.”

What they don’t see are the thousands of hours that Kleiankina has spent practicing the piano. She recalls being 2 years old when she saw her older sister

play the piano, amazed that a piece of furniture could create such beautiful sounds. As a child, one of her goals was to be famous, to be known around the world. But as she moved to a special high school for musicians, some 60 miles from her home, Kleiankina’s motivation began to change. It became more about her ability—and the exploration of what was possible with a piano—than about becoming famous. As a young student, it was not uncommon for her to practice for six or seven hours a day. Sometimes, she says, she would practice for as many as 11 hours. “I always wanted to improve,” she says. “I was sort of frightened and inspired at the same time. I was frightened by the amount of things I needed to know, but also inspired that there is so much to explore.”

Many of her students struggle to meet her expectation of even 15 minutes of practice a day. At one point, toward the end of the semester, Munirajulu says he





Cannon, above, and other students each took their turn at the piano during a dress rehearsal in Kleiankina's office. After they were done, Kleiankina, below, accepted her students' challenge to play both pianos at the same time. "Her fingers are just so nimble," Wilson says. "It's like, 'Wow!'"

didn't sleep for 40 hours as he tried to keep up with the work in his other classes. None of that time was spent practicing the piano. Lal laughs nervously when she is asked mid-semester about how much time she spends practicing. "It's really getting a little tough," she says, "with homework and the other stuff in the rest of the courses."

A DRESS REHEARSAL

As the Thanksgiving break approaches, Kleiankina tells the class the final exam will be a public recital. They will practice six songs in class, and the students have to pick one to play from memory in front of their classmates, students from other piano classes and any friends and family members they would like to invite. She reminds them of the importance of practice outside of class. "Push yourself hard," she says.

Kleiankina also tells them that the last class before the recital will be a dress



rehearsal, during which each student will be expected to play the song of their choice for their classmates. It will be the first time they will have heard one another play since the beginning of the semester, and for some of them that is reason enough to spend more time practicing.

"I don't want to embarrass myself in front of everyone else," says Cannon. "I don't want them to think I haven't been doing anything. So it's more about the pride of not messing up than it is about the grade."

The rehearsal is held in Kleiankina's office, one floor above the piano lab. It's actually a small performance space, with two baby grand pianos in the middle of the room. The students sit in chairs arranged around the edges. Kleiankina explains the format of next week's recital: The students should dress nicely ("like church"), state their name and the name of the song they are about to play. "If you're really, really nervous, breathe," she says.

Then she is ready to begin the rehearsal. "We need a volunteer," she says.

Kleiankina is met with silence. Finally, after several awkward seconds, one of the more experienced players in the class steps to the piano and performs a beautiful rendition of one of the songs. Lal goes next. She starts strong but hits the wrong note midway through the song. "Sorry," she says. Her face scrunches up when she hits another bad note at the end.

"I got nervous," she tells Kleiankina.

"Do you feel better now?"

"A little."

Then, speaking to all the students, Kleiankina says, "It's a big shock when you play a grand piano. It's so loud."

Key goes next, and admits that he doesn't know now to pronounce the name of the song he's performing. He struggles with the rhythm, but otherwise does well.

"You're a little bit safe," Kleiankina tells him. "Take more risk. Have some fun."

One by one, they take their turn at the piano. There are snippets that sound right, but few of the students are able to play the entire song cleanly. "They're still in progress," Kleiankina says after the class. "They got scared, and they got disappointed that they messed up. But they will probably work on this. I hope they will polish their work."

"IT WAS LIKE A JUMP START FOR ME. I GOT THE BASICS, HOW TO READ THE NOTES. FROM HERE ON, I CAN DO SELF-LEARNING. I'VE ALREADY BOUGHT A PIANO. —BHARATH MUNIRAJULU, GRADUATE STUDENT, COMPUTER SCIENCE

THE FINAL EXAM

Several of the students arrive early for the recital, in a rehearsal hall in the basement of Price Music Center. Lal is in a practice room, trying to get in a few more reps before she performs. Key came over to Price the night before to practice on the grand piano in the rehearsal hall. Wilson shows up a few minutes early and declares himself ready. "I've got it down, at least when I'm alone," he says. He practiced every day since the rehearsal, and even had a friend look over his shoulder while he played. "I mean, I've got it down. At least if I can focus."

There are about 50 students—plus a smattering of friends and family members—in the rehearsal hall as the recital begins. Kleiankina sits in a back row, silently writing notes to herself as her students take their turns at the piano.

Lal announces that she will play three songs, earning extra credit for the additional two songs. While most students sit erect on the piano bench, Lal hunches over the keyboard, her long black hair nearly reaching the piano bench. She plays the first two songs well, but struggles a bit with the third.

The crowd has thinned out to about 30 by the time Wilson steps up. He plays his song well, then stands up and bows with great flourish, drawing laughter from the other students. Cannon waits until the crowd thins out even more before he gets up to play "A Little Blues." He is much better than he was at the rehearsal a few days ago, his only obvious miscue coming near the end of the song. Munirajulu was one of the last students to arrive for the recital, and is one of the last to perform. His effort is stiff, and he mishits several keys at the end. He says later that his

exams in other classes left him no time to practice since the rehearsal.

But he is glad he took the class. "It was like a jump start for me," he says. "I got the basics, how to read the notes. From here on, I can do self-learning. I've already bought a piano."

Wilson says he would like to take another piano class some day but plans to continue practicing until he can fit another class into his schedule. Key was surprised by how difficult the class was at times but says he has the tools now to figure out any song.

As for Lal, she has already signed up for Class Piano II.

"In the beginning, I was just trying to grasp how your fingers move," she says. "It seemed impossible. In the end, it's a feeling of success that, yes, you've made it. I was able to get the notes, the music, out of a piece of paper."



Wilson, left, finished his final recital with a flourish while Kleiankina, in orange shirt, took note. Lal, right, performed two extra songs to earn extra credit during her recital.

