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Celebrating the Spectrum: A Festival of Music and Life

MSU College of Music hosts second annual summer program for pre-college students with autism

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EAST LANSING, Mich. – Advanced music students who are on the autism spectrum will preview life as a collegiate musician when the MSU College of Music hosts a one-of-a-kind summer piano festival for the second year.

Slated for July 16-23, the 2017 “Celebrating the Spectrum: A Festival of Music and Life” will immerse seven pre-college students in a daily schedule that emulates a week in the life of a music major in a college setting. Students hail from East Lansing to Kansas to Florida, and will be welcomed by MSU President Lou Anna K. Simon at a July 17 concert featuring College of Music graduate students at 6 p.m. The eight-day festival culminates in a second concert on July 22 at 4 p.m. that features participating students, faculty and mentors. Both concerts take place in the College’s Cook Recital Hall, Music Building, 333 W. Circle Drive, and are free and open to the public.

“Our number one goal remains the same as our inaugural year,” says Derek Polischuk, MSU associate professor of piano and director of piano pedagogy. “That is providing an incredibly inspiring, high-level artistic experience for students on the autism spectrum. We’re building on last year’s successes by adding some exceptional new faculty, and new activities that include jazz improvisation. We’re also offering more things for parents and family members of attendees to do as we build momentum toward making this an annual event for an increasing number of people.”

Equally critical goals, Polischuk says, are to improve perceptions about the abilities of students and children with autism to attend college, and to contribute to research and effective teaching methods. The festival fosters understanding, Polischuk says, by immersing students in a collegiate environment and routine—complete with a sampling of residence hall living, dorm food, and a rigorous schedule directed toward particular outcomes.

Polischuk teaches piano to students with autism through MSU’s Community Music School. About two years ago, he discussed the idea of a weeklong, immersive experience with Professor of Piano Deborah Moriarty, chair of the piano area. The two then contacted the RAIN D Program—the MSU-based institute for Research in Autism, Intellectual and other Neurodevelopmental Disabilities that serves students with autism through research, outreach, artistry and education.

“RAIN D is a multi-disciplinary effort, and involving the College of Music adds further dimension to what we do,” says Ian Gray, who helped create the RAIN D Program. “Celebrating the Spectrum gives the College of Music a place at the table to talk about research with other university colleagues. The Spectrum program is very positive, and increases the visibility of MSU as an institution committed to enhancing the lives of others through community engagement, inclusion and research.”

The festival includes daily master classes on piano repertoire taught by Moriarty and Polischuk. Other elements include hour-long lectures by national and international educators, guided Pilates for R&R, classes in chamber music and jazz improvisation, and lunch, dinner and evening activities on the MSU campus. Guest lecturers include Lauren Harris, MSU professor of psychology; Scott Price, professor of piano and piano pedagogy, and

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coordinator of piano pedagogy at the University of South Carolina School of Music; and Shannon de l'Etoile, associate dean, graduate students, and professor for the Music Therapy program at the University of Miami Frost School of Music. Additional key faculty include Connie Wible, owner of Music Mind Piano Studio in Mercer Island, Washington; Randy Napoleon, MSU assistant professor of jazz guitar; and Diego Rivera, MSU associate professor of jazz saxophone and associate director of Jazz Studies.

Each student will be paired with one of eight College of Music student mentors. The College will also partner with various departments and resources across campus to provide the essential support, services and special accommodations students may need.

Rex Lewis-Clack, one of this year's registered participants, was featured at age seven on the CBS show 60 Minutes in 2003, and subsequent follow up profiles in 2005 and 2008, earning the Edward R. Murrow Award, "Best Feature in a Newsmagazine." Born blind, Lewis-Clack was diagnosed with autism as a toddler. Considered a prodigious musical savant by musicologists, he ranks as one of less than 50 people throughout history to combine blindness, intellectual disability, and prodigious musical ability.

Organizers of Celebrating the Spectrum plan to analyze the effectiveness of particular teaching methods, the effect the daily musical routine has on attitudes and behaviors, and how the festival experience affects the perceptions students and families may have about attending college.

"Music is a language that speaks across many borders and often opens unexpected doors," Moriarty says. [By] "celebrating and highlighting the abilities of young musicians on the autism spectrum, we hope to provide an exciting and enriching experience for students, families and the community as well as increasing awareness of the RAIND program and MSU's commitment to this project."

"Celebrating the Spectrum: A Festival of Music and Life" is coordinated by Michigan State University College of Music and sponsored by MSU as part of the RAIND Program, with generous support provided by the MSU Office of the Provost, and the following corporate sponsors and donors: Sparrow Health System and the MSU Federal Credit Union, as well as generous support from MSU alumni and friends: April Clobes and Glen Brough, Lauren Harris, Merritt and Candy Lutz, Jack and Karen Noonan, along with support from the Frances Baldwin Mulnix Endowment Fund at MSU. Special thanks to Dean Trailways for generously providing all transportation needs for festival participants.

To learn more about the program, visit [the Celebrating the Spectrum article online](#) or contact Derek Polischuk at polischu@msu.edu.

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