PLUGGED IN

Online Music School

LEARNING LIVE AT BERKLEEMUSIC.COM

BY NORMAN WEINBERG

Hi-tech has had a profound impact upon just about every aspect of our lives, but the current advances in music technology are nothing short of revolutionary. Just a few years ago you had to pay big money to record at a professional studio. And if you didn't have a contract with a record company that had good distribution, your recordings were never heard. It's common knowledge that a few hundred bucks worth of workstation software and an Internet connection has made this old model obsolete.

Could it be possible that another important institution, the classroom, is on the road to obsolescence? Online education has been around for a few years, and just about every American university offers some courses online. In terms of music, however, the offerings are surprisingly few, but growing every year. The Berklee School Of Music has been online just about as long as anybody, and its cyber curriculum covers a wide variety of topics. I wanted to see if the online educational experience is as good as putting your butt in a seat at a community college or university, and enrolled in a couple of classes. Here's what it was like.

TRUST YOUR TEACHER

If you don't have faith in your professor, you might not trust that the instruction is valid. I once took a class with a teacher who didn't really understand the subject very well. It annoyed me – there I was paying all that money and investing all my time, and the professor wasn't an expert on the subject. Okay, sorry about the rant.

Depending on where you live, you may not have access to an expert on a particular topic you need for your education. If that's the case, then your choices are simple: 1) Don't get the educa-

tion you feel you need to advance your career and your life, 2) Move to a city that has the educational opportunities you feel you need, or 3) Get your education online. I live in Tucson, Arizona. That's a city with a population of around a million people that hosts a thriving state university (The University of Arizona), and a strong community college (Pima). Still, there are no classes on much of the cutting-edge music technology software that I'm interested in learning. Going online was my only choice.

The professor for my online course at Berklee was Loudon Stearns. He's a professional bassist, composer, and laptop musician. In addition to teaching my course, he teachers other courses in music technology, sequencing, recording, and film scoring. His two degrees are from Berklee, so he's well acquainted with the school's philosophy and dedication to quality. He was initially hired at Berklee to train and support the

faculty on music technology, and he's been working with Live since Abelton introduced version 4 about three years ago. I have no doubt that Loudon is a person who knows what he is talking about and is an experienced teacher – both online and in person.

In addition, he has the entire Berklee staff to help with the design and teaching of the course. "When designing a course, the faculty member works closely with the Berklee music staff to make sure that the lessons are being presented in the best possible way," Stearns says. "Berkleemusic.com is constantly developing new ways to interact with the students and present course material. The great thing is that once a new tool is built it can be utilized in future courses."

Stearns believes that getting a quality education is the key to a successful career. "The choice between the online or classroom experience is not a choice between what is better or worse,"

he says. "The question is: What is better for you and your situation? Either way you go, you have made the right decision."

REGISTRATION AND FEES

It was pretty easy to enroll in the course. I simply went to the Berklee web site, picked my class, and followed the instructions. These courses aren't cheap, but their true value is in what is gained by taking them. Twelve-week, three-credit courses range from $695 to $995 depending on the topic. Not all courses are twelve weeks long. A six-week, two-credit course, such as the "Songwriting Workshop: Hit Song Forms," is $495. If you want to take any of the courses for credit, you'll need to add $200 to the tuition. According to Stearns, about a third of the students in his classes are taking them for credit. If you're enrolled for credit, the professor grades each assignment, and the average of those assignments determines your final grade.

Berkleemusic.com offers a huge number of online classes that, when taken together, can form a curriculum that becomes a certificate program. While not actually college degrees, they are similar to certificate programs at other trade and professional schools. Berklee's certificate programs come in three flavors, and range from the Master Certificate consisting of 8–12 courses, to the Specialist Certificate with a 3–4-course requirement. Topics include music business, technology, production, sound design, composition, songwriting, arranging, music theory, and software-specific classes such as Pro Tools, SONAR, Reason, Finale, and Sibelius. Like any institution of higher learning, financial aid and scholarships are available to help with the expenses. If you're not interested in a certificate program, you can pick and choose your courses to fit your interests and needs.

I've been using Ableton's Live software for a couple of years. It's an amazing piece of software, and I would consider myself pretty comfortable with the program. But deep down inside I knew that I was just touching the surface of what it was capable of doing and how much power it hides under its hood. Like a game of chess, Live is easy to learn, yet has so much depth that you can always find a new way of being creative with it. I figured that a 12-week course would take me as close as I could come to being an expert in the program, and that's what I wanted to become.

THE ONLINE EXPERIENCE

In a physical classroom, some professors speak so fast that it's difficult to take notes or understand a topic before they're off on another tangent. Some might skirt over ideas you think are important, or spend too much time on something you already know. Professor Stearns feels that the benefit of online learning is that it is self-paced. "Stu-

FIG. 1 The lesson page on the use of clip envelopes on berkleemusic.com's online course on Ableton's Live

dents have the opportunity to reread the material and absorb at their own rate," he says. "Teaching in the classroom is always a matter of balancing everyone's needs; this is somewhat alleviated with online learning."

While it's true that the instant feedback of the traditional student/teacher relationship is missing in an online course, Stearns feels that this can be a positive rather than a negative experience. "Online courses challenge students to solve their own problems, and this is particularly true with technology classes," he says. "A portion of my classroom classes is always troubleshooting. Without me by their side, students solve their own problems. This is an empowering lesson in itself."

At first, you might not think you need to go back and review information you've already covered, but I constantly found myself wanting to see or do

something a second time. Since working with Live is a creative experience, you're not just gathering factual information, but getting ideas on how the program operates, what it can do, and how it can be used to accomplish a particular task. I created a couple of the assignments multiple times, just so I could have more experience with the software and make sure the information was totally in my hands and in my memory. I could take a few minutes and reread a passage, watch a video a second time, or jump back to a previous lesson.

I very often found myself getting to know a command or a technique and then thinking, "This would be perfect when I'm trying to ..." or "I wonder if I can get Live to do it this way." It's then perfectly natural to stop the progress of the class and dive into Live to experiment. It is a true luxury to have the course in one window and Live in another. This made it very easy to go back and forth between the lesson and the software in a smooth and seamless transition.

Over the course of 12 weeks, you're presented with 12 different lessons. Each took between

one and three hours to go through. As the ideas get a little more challenging, it naturally takes a little longer to absorb all the information and complete the assignments.

Each lesson comes with an introduction that clearly explains that week's subject. There's also a list of key objectives that lets you know the skills you should have by the time you complete the lesson. Along the way, there are clear instructions for any differences that can be found between Mac and PC systems, as well as clear instructions for downloading the demo files used for the various lessons. If you're at all computer literate, you're not going to have trouble navigating through the lessons.

Lessons consist of a number of pages that tie topics together to cover a larger-scale concept. As you can see in **FIG. 1**, the left side of the screen shows you
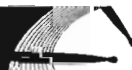
where you are within a particular lesson. You can use this menu to jump from section to section inside the lesson, or use the buttons at the bottom of the window to move to the previous or next page of the lesson. The main body of the lesson contains text with screen shots of the software to highlight the particular idea. I found that all of the text was very well written, clear, and in a conversational tone. The screen shots are also informative and help to keep you on track. If your screen doesn't look like the screen shot shown in the lesson, you've done something goofy and might need to retrace your steps.

I like the idea of presenting these sometimes-complex ideas in small, bite-size chunks. It's really perfect for online learning. When an idea is first introduced, you have the chance to understand a single idea or

concept before moving on to the next page. When reading a book, you're often looking at pages and pages of information and might feel the need to push forward though the information before you really "get" it. Working in this manner, I had the feeling of: "Okay, I get that. Let's move on to the next page." There was also a feeling of accomplishment each time I clicked to the next page of the lesson. This is an experience that I don't get sitting in a classroom or reading a manual.

In the illustration you can see a "Show Me" icon. Click-

ing on it opens a new, floating window that contains a short movie clip. The movie usually contains live action of the program with a voiceover explaining the process. This is a great way to learn as you can see in real time the screen features that are activated, how they are manipulated, hear the teacher explain what is happening, and hear the results in the software.

Throughout the lessons, there are other icons called "notes" and "tips." A note icon is followed on screen with a reminder or a special instruction to help clarify the techniques

covered in the lesson. When you click on a tip icon, a floating popup window comes into view that contains additional information. A tip may have something to do with basic music production, such as the balance between system headroom and optimum output before reaching distortion, or it may be more specific to a lesson's goals. I preferred the tip. The experience was not unlike landing on Community Chest in a game of Monopoly. It was always a surprise to see what the next tip was going to be.

When a lesson has been completed, a ten-question multiple-choice quiz tests your comprehension on that lesson's information. You can retake these quizzes any time and as often as you want. When you answer a question correctly you're rewarded with a cheering crowd and text that reads "correct" and "good job." With
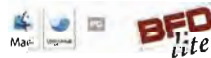
a correct answer, the screen automatically updates to the next question and you can continue with the exam. Miss a question and "incorrect" pops up on the screen with a sound that's much less pleasant than the adoring crowd. All this may sound a little corny, but it's really sort of rewarding to have this type of feedback. I also found that taking the quiz a couple of times reinforced the lesson's material.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

After each quiz there is a discussion area where students share their ideas and experiences related to the lesson. Some of the posts in the discussion area are nothing more than statements about how a particular student might interact with the program. Other posts offer tangible ideas about how to use Live in a certain way that might really speak to you and relate to what you're interested in doing with the software.

The discussion board and the online chats are important parts of the learning experience. "I'm a bit of a computer geek and email is my favorite form of communication," Stearns says. "If a student has a question, I usually get back to them that day or the next. We reserve email for private problems – dog ate my homework stuff. If the email answer would be useful for the class as a whole, we will move to a discussion board where the whole class can benefit." I've always believed that students learn as much from their peers as from teachers, and found that the discussion area was valuable in expanding the learning process to include ideas from other students in the class.

For more class interaction, there's an online forum where you can begin and respond to discussion threads. There are also online chats each week (sometimes more often). If you can't make the online chat time due to schedule conflicts you can go back and read the complete text of a chat. I found these two experiences good substitutes for

hanging with other students in the coffee lounge or the lobby.

Stearns believes that students get what they need in an online environment. "I think this is one of the benefits of online teaching," he says. "The students that need a sense of belonging can make the effort to go to the chats and the discussion boards and form those bonds. At the same time, some students don't want that and are fine to sit back and learn the material. I see this same dynamic in a regular classroom – some students sit right up front and some against the back wall."

ASSIGNMENTS

The focus here is on the practical rather than the theoretical. Assignments are based on what the lesson covers, and I found completing them to be very rewarding. Rather than

> ## Each student creates his or her own musical ideas using materials that are provided

just learning the materials, you have the opportunity to apply your newfound knowledge directly to your own musical canvas. Each student creates his or her own musical ideas using materials that are provided in downloaded files. This is to ensure that everyone works with the same set of samples and files. Once you've built your masterpiece, you upload it to the site with an explanation of what you've done. This allows everyone in the class to hear all of the musical ideas

and learn from each other in a very concrete way.

COVERAGE

I found that the course covered everything I needed. The first lessons consisted of basic overviews of the software and how to understand the user interface on a very general level. The following lessons covered each aspect of the program in complete detail: creating mp3 files from inside Live, MIDI capabilities, mix automation, working with Live's software in-
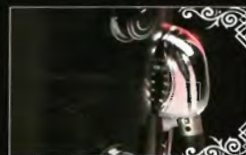
struments, creating samples, and much more.

THE FUTURE OF ONLINE LEARNING

My experience with this course has been great! I feel I learned as much (if not much more) than I would have if I had taken the class in a more traditional environment. "Online and immediate is the new way," Stearns says. "How do you get your music? Once the iTunes store hit I haven't bought a CD, but I buy music like there is no tomorrow. Online education is empowering. You can learn from great teachers while still going to work during the day. I have students from Italy and Hong Kong – Berkleemusic.com is fostering a global community." If you've been thinking about joining this global community, I highly recommend it. ∎