

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival celebrates 26 years this June

by Mike Telin



With the flipping of the calendar next week, the summer festival season in Northeast Ohio is set to launch. Keeping with tradition, the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival will once again be leading the way.

Celebrating its 26th year, the Festival will run from June 4 through 7 at the Cleveland Institute of Music. This year CICGF will be highlighted by six concerts performed by internationally renowned guitarists and supporting musicians, six lectures, six master classes, private lessons, a demonstration of fine concert guitars, and the seventh annual James Stroud National Classical Guitar Youth Competition.

“Year 26, believe it or not,” Festival founder and artistic director Armin Kelly exclaimed during a recent telephone conversation. He noted that the six concerts are equally divided between solo and chamber music recitals. All performances will be held in Mixon Hall.

“It’s been a long-term goal of mine to have solo guitar and chamber music,” Kelly said. “We’ve had guitar and cello, guitar and flute, guitar and harp, guitar and voice, and this year we have guitar and viola. I’m very excited about that aspect of the Festival. I can’t say that it doesn’t happen at other classical guitar festivals, but it’s rare, and I think it’s really important. It’s also setting an example for the young artists in the Stroud Competition, that not everyone can be a soloist or should be, and that playing chamber music is very rewarding — it’s fun both for the players and the audience.”

Concerts begin on Thursday, June 4 at 7:30 pm when 2015 Grammy Award Winner Jason Vieaux plays works by Barrios, Morel, Orbon, Ponce, Pujol, Villa-Lobos, and Segovia, as well as one of his own compositions.



“Jason is much beloved here, as he should be,” Kelly said. “He likes to start off the festival, and usually gives a short introduction and welcome, and that’s always very nice.”

On Friday, June 5 at 7:30 pm, the Kaleido Guitar Duo — Hao Yang and Kevin Loh — will play works by Debussy, Dodgson, Dun, Dyens, Ginastera, and Goss.

“Hao Yang has been here both as a soloist and chamber player. This year she’s coming with her wonderful duo partner Kevin Loh from Singapore. I’ve heard and

watched some private videos, and oh my goodness, they are so good together — which really doesn’t surprise me because they’re both so talented. We’re really excited to have them here,” Kelly said.

Muxin Li will play music by Ascencio, Barrios, Castelnuovo-Tedexco, Llobet, Regondi, and Rodrigo on Saturday, June 6 at 3:00 pm.

“She’s studying at the Curtis Institute and I refer to her as a student, but oh my gosh, she’s thoroughly professional,” Kelly said. “I saw her competing in the Guitar Foundation of America Concert Artist division, which was streamed. She was the youngest competitor and took second place. As soon as I heard her I said, we’ve got to get her. So she’s coming and I’m excited to have her perform here.”

That evening at 7:30 pm, the Davin-Levin Duo — Colin Davin (guitar), and Emily Levin (harp) will perform works by J.S. Bach, Brouwer, Pujol, Glass, and Ravel.

“We’ve had them here before. They’re an incredible duo and very creative in the repertoire they play. They had a work written for them by Cuban guitarist and composer Leo Brouwer. Although this is not the premiere, it will be the first performance in Cleveland.”

On Sunday, June 7 at 1:00 pm, Nicolò Spera will be joined by flutist Christina Jennings and violist Matthew Dane in music by Bresnick, Micheli, Pann, and Theofanidis.

“Nicolò will be presenting four world premieres along with works by Christopher Theofanidis. Some of the works are for solo guitar, and some are for flute and guitar, and then flute, guitar, and viola — it should be wonderful.”

Festival concerts will conclude at 4:00 pm when Petra Polácková presents “The Art of Polyphony” featuring works by J.S. Bach, Collins, Dowland, Narvaez, and Torroba.

“Petra Polácková is a dear friend of the Festival. When she first came, I think it was a little over 10 years ago, she was still an undergrad at the conservatory in Graz. Since then she’s earned undergrad degrees in teaching and in performance, and a master’s degree also from Graz.

I think two years ago she was appointed professor of guitar at the Hochschule Franz Liszt in Weimar, which is one of the most important guitar departments in Europe. I’m so excited for her. She’s worked so hard over the years and gone from undergrad to professor at a leading European conservatory.”

CICGF will begin with the Semi-Final Round of the James Stroud Classical Guitar Competition. On Thursday, June 4 at 9:45 am and 1:30 pm sixteen young guitarists ages thirteen to eighteen will perform for the public and a panel of internationally acclaimed judges. See their profiles [here](#).

On Sunday, June 7 at 6:30, four contestants will compete for the \$10,000 first prize.

In addition to performing, Festival artists will also offer master classes that are free and open to the public. “Most of the spots will be taken by Stroud Competition semifinalists. For ethical reasons, we don’t invite the four semifinalists who are chosen to perform in the final round to perform in the master classes, although they are certainly encouraged to attend,” Kelly said.

Another feature of the Festival are the Free Pre-Concert Lectures presented by Jonathan Leathwood in CIM Room 113.

On Thursday, June 4, 6:00 to 7:15 pm the topic is *Zooming In and Zooming Out: The Poetry of Large-Scale Relationships in Guitar Music*. [See Synopsis](#).

On Friday at 6:00 pm, Leathwood’s Topic will be *The Song in the Dance: Bach’s Melodies*. [See Synopsis](#).



On Saturday at 1:30 pm, Leathwood will discuss *Imaginative Arrangement on the Guitar* ([see Synopsis](#)) and at 6:00 pm, *The Guitarist's Touch: Right- and Left-Hand Expression* ([see Synopsis](#)).

On Sunday, June 7 at 11:30 am, the topic will be *Finding Ease at the Guitar: A Workshop in the Alexander Technique* ([see Synopsis](#)), and at 3:00 Leathwood will lead a *Post-Concert Discussion with guitarist Nicolò Spera* ([see Synopsis](#)).

“Jonathan has been a friend for many years. I’ve always respected him for his performances, his scholarly work, his writing ability, and his oral presentations,” Kelly said. “He says that these lectures are designed for all levels, and that's true. You don’t have to be trained as a musicologist to enjoy them. I know everyone who attends them has a great time. And they’re free.”

An admirable feature of CICGF has been the informative program book and this year it’s available [online](#). “Hopefully people will read the program notes, the synopses about the lectures, and the thumbnail biographies of the performers, as well as the Stroud Competition semifinalists,” Kelly said. “I’m thrilled that we could get the information up in advance, because a lot of it is helpful and you won’t have to read everything fifteen minutes before the concert.”

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