

## Stroud Classical Guitar Competition goes digital, with finals this weekend

by Daniel Hathaway



Aytahn Benavi  
(Texas)



Patricia Hernandez  
(Florida)



Ian Tubbs  
(Indiana)



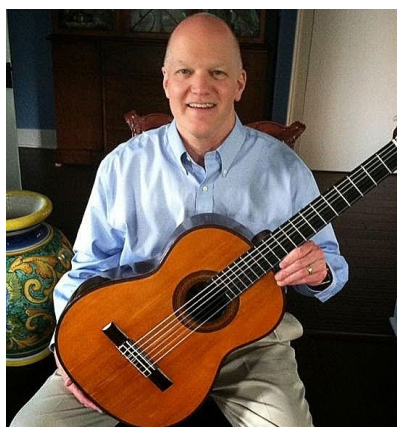
Eric Wang  
(California)

Among the many best-laid plans that went awry when the coronavirus pandemic came to town was the premiere of James Stroud's new [Classical Guitar Competition](#), reconfigured for young

guitarists ages 14 to 18, and scheduled to make its debut during the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival last May at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

The contest goes on this weekend, thanks to digital technology. The four contestants who have advanced so far via preliminary video performances have sent in final round videos for streaming on Friday, October 16. After vetting by a panel of judges, prizes of \$10,000, \$5,000, \$2,500, and \$1,000 will be awarded.

Hudson resident James Stroud launched his competition 20 years ago, and decided to change its emphasis and move it to CIM after holding previous contests at the University of Akron and Oberlin. "I always wanted to turn this into a national thing," he said in a recent telephone conversation. "When I asked a number of guitarists and teachers how I could make the greatest impact, they advised me to concentrate on high school students.



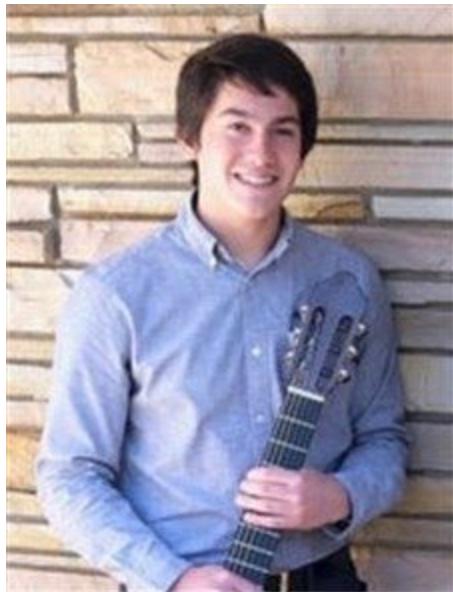
"There are great kids coming up. I knew that Armin Kelly's Festival at CIM was the best in the country, I love Mixon Hall, and (CIM President) Paul Hogle was super responsive to the idea." Then the virus hit. When

Kelly postponed his 2020 Festival, Stroud decided to move his competition online.

On Friday, October 16 at 7:00 pm, the final round videos from the remaining four competitors will be broadcast on YouTube. The panel of judges — Stephen Aron,

Mark Delpriora, Matteo Mela, Lorenzo Micheli, Nigel North, Marco Sartor, and Jason Vieaux — will rank the winners, to be followed by the announcement of prizes.

We caught up with the four finalists by telephone to learn more about them and chat about their final round programs.



**Aytahn Benavi**, 18, is just beginning his first year at the University of Texas in his hometown of Austin. “I took up the guitar when I was five, almost by accident,” he said. “My dad listens to bluegrass, so I heard a lot of that when I was really young, and I still like it.” When he decided to study the instrument, he ran into a roadblock. “In Austin, nobody was going to teach bluegrass guitar to a five-year-old, but there was a classical guitar teacher only 10 minutes away. Classical was close enough!”

Years later, Aytahn was playing with two guitar orchestras in Austin, appeared on NPR’s *From the Top*, and composer Angelo Gardino offered to write a piece for him. “That’s a real honor for a sixteen-year-old kid,” he said. “It’s called *The Joyful Island*, and Debussy’s *L’Isle joyeuse* is the model.” Benavi will play it in the final round along with works by Dionisio Aguado and Vicente Asencio. “Asencio’s *La Joia* is a blast,” he said. “it’s in 6/8 time with lots of scales and runs and a melodic section in the middle full of Spanish lyricism.”

Benavi’s UT experience so far has been entirely virtual. “Everything since March has been a video.” That includes his performances for the Stroud Competition, which he has recorded at home. “I like doing that. After lots of takes, you can go hit tennis balls to take the edge off.” On the other hand, you can endlessly re-record the same piece, aiming for perfection. “That can become a really long process that takes forever. You just have to let go at some point.”

When we spoke, Benavi had just watched Novak Djokovic defeat Pable Carreño Busta in four sets at the French Open. “I’m a huge tennis fan. I was hoping that Busta could hang in there, but Djokovic is going to give Nadal a run for his money.”

Watch Benavi’s semifinal video submission [here](#).

**Patricia Hernandez** is 16 and lives in Miami. She shares her interest in the classical guitar with her twin sister — they both began studying at the age of seven with the same teacher, and they perform together as the Miami Guitar Duo. “It’s extremely

fun to play as a duo. We feed off one another and play in the same competitions, where we support and learn from each other,” she said.



Hernandez has already recorded music by Dowland, Mertz, and Giuliani for her Stroud final round. “Playing for a camera has been challenging — you’re always thinking of the last take and the next one. I like trying to achieve perfection, but performing live for an audience creates a whole different energy.”

She remembers playing for Jason Vieaux in her very first master class. “It was an amazing experience, and exposed me to a lot.”

When not playing the guitar, Hernandez says she loves volleyball, singing, and school work — math and photography are her favorite subjects. During the lockdown, she said she worked out a lot and did some painting.

Does the classical guitar figure prominently in her future? “I’ll always play music, but I’m also interested in business and finance,” she said. Meanwhile, Hernandez misses performing and competing in person. “I love my fellow contestants. I hope we can resume physical performances soon and connect with people.”

*Watch Hernandez’ semifinal video submission [here](#).*



**Ian Tubbs**, 15, lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he started piano lessons at the age of four. Since taking up the classical guitar seven-and-a-half years ago, Tubbs has won a number of competitions and awards, and has played in guitar ensembles at Indiana University.

In his final round program, which he selected with the help of his teacher, Tubbs said “we tried to cover all the genres and include pieces that fit together but were different and contrasting.” That includes music by J.S. Bach, Mertz, Walton, and Koshkin, and he had already made his recordings when we spoke. “I recorded for four-and-a-half hours today — I had to finish that before a soccer tournament this week.”

Tubbs said that playing to the camera is a different kind of stress, though he prefers performing to a live audience. “It’s more exciting.”

While other contestants have had to adjust to various combinations of in-person and remote learning this fall, Tubbs has been relatively unaffected by the pandemic. “I’m home schooled, so not much is really different.” In addition to his soccer involvements, he likes “math and building things with legos, photography, and reading.” His tastes in photography lean toward pictures of flowers, trees, sunsets and sunrises, and he’s just finished reading *Lord of the Rings*. “I never before read it cover to cover.”

Watch Tubbs’ semifinal video submission [here](#).



**Eric Wang**, a 10th-grader in San José, California, started learning the guitar at the age of four, “Probably because my dad is an amateur classical guitarist,” but he does recall being fascinated by seeing instruments in a music store. His instruments have grown up with him: “I started on a small spruce-top guitar, 40-some centimeters, then moved up to 52, 56, and 64, and finally to the 65-centimeter instrument I play today.”

A veteran of many competitions who has also appeared on *From the Top*, Wang enjoyed planning his final round repertoire for the Stroud Competition. “The main factor was how much I liked the pieces,

but I gave the program a coherent structure by playing the first movement of a Koshkin Sonata, the second of Bach’s *Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro*, and the last of Ponce’s *Sonata Romantica*.”

Wang went on to say more about his pieces. “Koshkin’s *Sonata No. 2* has a dark, intimidating character, but parts are really heart-rending. I’ve loved the Bach fugue for a long time — it never stops and is purely beautiful. I just love Ponce’s music in general — it’s playful and emotional at the same time.”

When we spoke, Wang hadn’t finished recording his final round, which he planned to do over the weekend. How does it feel to play for nobody? “Well, there’s my dad, but it’s sometimes challenging to muster up musicality without an audience.”

One of Wang’s hobbies is astronomy, and he’s part of a research program at school, where the pandemic has resulted in hybrid classes this fall. “We go to school in person once a week. But the lockdown has been good because I could go outside and

play soccer a lot, although the wildfires have prevented some of that.” Wang’s family wasn’t directly threatened, “but the air quality was pretty abysmal.”

Before we rang off, Wang wished good luck to his fellow competitors. “I hope it goes well for everyone.”

*Watch Wang’s semifinal video submission [here](#).*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 13, 2020*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)