

Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: a conversation with Robert Gruca

by Mike Telin



From the time he moved to Northeast Ohio to attend the Cleveland Institute of Music, [Robert Gruca](#) has always looked forward to the annual Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival. “When you’re a student it’s a huge opportunity to hear such great artists and have master classes with them — and to be able to pick their brains about professional life,” Gruca said during a recent interview.

On Friday, May 21, Gruca and lutenist Nigel North will have the honor of kicking off the 2021 edition of that Festival with a split-bill, pre-recorded recital beginning at 7:30 pm. Viewing access is free — watch [here](#) — and [donations](#) are encouraged.

Since his student days, the guitarist has gone on to enjoy an active career as a performer, educator, and clinician. Hailed by *Audaud.com* as “a brilliant player with gorgeous tone and a flawless sense of rhythm,” Gruca has earned several first prizes in national guitar competitions and released two solo recordings. He launched the first Suzuki Guitar program in Northeast Ohio at The Music Settlement in 2013. Along with flutist Linda White, he is one-half of the acclaimed [Gruca White Ensemble](#).

When asked about his program, Gruca noted that his first instinct was to present two multi-movement, fifteen-minute works but he quickly reconsidered that decision. “When you poke around you can find shorter works by some of the bigger names, so I decided to go with some groupings of smaller pieces.”

His program will open with a set of Spanish pieces — Regino Sanz de la Maza’s *Andaluza* and Joaquín Malats’ *Serenata Española* — and continue with three pieces by Paraguayan guitarist and composer Agustín Barrios: *Vals*, Op. 8, No. 4, *Julia Florida*, and *Danza Paraguaya*. The program will conclude with two works by French guitarist

and composer Roland Dyens — *Songe Capricorne* and *Fuoco*. “He passed away in 2016 and I’ve always loved his music.”

The recital was recorded by fellow guitarist and Festival participant Colin Davin in the pleasing acoustic of the audition room for Guitars International, the business that Festival founder Armin Kelly runs out of his house. Gruca said that although he missed the “edge” that an audience brings to an in-person performance, the recording session was fun. “Colin’s got all the gear and he’s so multi-talented, so he and Armin were the audience that knew what they were listening to, and that was cool. But when you’re performing, you feed off the person in the third row who’s smiling at you.”

The video also includes some artist performance tips. “I talked about scales and how you can play them differently depending on the context, with examples from a couple of Spanish works. It’s the old ‘you learn the rules so you can break them.’”

In addition to performances, for the second time the Festival will host the James Stroud Classical Guitar Competition which is open to U.S. residents ages 14 to 18. “I got to judge the preliminary round of the competition,” Gruca said, “and these kids are amazing.”

Like all performing artists Gruca has experienced a sharp decline in performances because of the pandemic, which made it extremely difficult for the Gruca White Ensemble to promote their CD, *A Different Take*. “It was the worst timing possible,” he said. “We finished recording it in February of 2020 right before everything shut down. We were able to have a Zoom release back in November but that was about it. Over the summer Linda and I are going to start getting together outdoors and planning some outside performances. But it’s like starting over.” Click [here](#) to read Jarrett Hoffman’s review.

In spite of the past year’s difficulties, Gruca is happy to be in a place where the classical guitar is so popular. “This area is such a guitar hub with schools like Oberlin, CIM, and BW, and there are so many great players who live here. But there’s a great camaraderie — which is so nice.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com May 19, 2021.

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