

Armin Kelly talks about taking this year's International Classical Guitar Festival online

by Daniel Hathaway



Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival founder Armin Kelly was planning to celebrate the second decade of the event when the novel coronavirus crashed the party. “The 2020 shutdown was too close to our festival time to put an alternate plan together,” he said in a recent phone conversation. “So we put up one streamed concert, and that was our 20th anniversary season.”

That concert featured perennial festival favorites Jason Vieaux and Colin Davin performing from the audition room of Guitars International, the business Kelly runs out of his house. “It made me very happy to present them, because Jason and Colin had had all of their concerts cancelled and hadn’t been able to perform for anyone for a month or two,” Kelly said. He added that he had more fun than anyone else at

his own party. “There was so much excitement behind the scenes. It really touched my heart.”

Kelly hoped that the 2021 Festival could return to Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, but when that turned out to be impossible, he began thinking about how to create a virtual international gathering that would also include the James Stroud Youth Competition.

The resulting Festival will take place online on five Friday evenings from May 21 through June 18, beginning with a shared recital by lutenist Nigel North and Cleveland-based guitarist Robert Gruca and ending with the Stroud Competition finals.

In between, performers will share one-hour time slots on May 28 (Ji Yeon Kim, Republic of Korea, and Daniel Lippel, USA), June 4 (Drew Henderson, Canada, and

Petra Poláčková, Czech Republic), and June 11 (Colin Davin, USA, and Duo Melis, Spain and Greece). View the complete schedule [here](#).

The transition to an online festival has required adjustments. “It’s not been easy, it’s not been insurmountable, but just different,” Kelly said. “Because I’ve never done this before and most of our artists haven’t either, there’s been a lot of learning on the fly. I’m very indebted to the patience, generosity, and creativity of everyone I’ve been working with. Usually I do a lot of the pre-festival preparation myself, but this year artists have been more involved. There are a lot of fingers in the pie.”

Some of those fingers will be doing more than plucking guitar strings. Canadian guitarist Drew Henderson also happens to be a professional videographer, who will supply his own footage from Toronto, and Colin Davin, who has learned the art by practicing it, will produce videos for Nigel North, Robert Gruca, and himself.

Some of the Festival artists have gone to considerable lengths to be able to appear virtually in Cleveland. Petra Poláčková made her recording in Austria and one performer had to replace her aging computer.

The most remarkable recording story was told to Armin Kelly by Duo Melis. “They went to Athens, where they had reserved a wonderful church and hired the best videographer in town. Then I got a panicked phone call. Athens was on lockdown due to the pandemic, and people were only allowed two hours a day outside their homes. While the Duo were recording, everybody else was out on the streets too.

“They said that with honking horns and street noise with a few cuss words mixed in, they couldn’t send me that video. But — and I can’t believe they did this — they got entrance permission to fly to England where a guitarist friend also works as a videographer. Their recording should come in this week.”

At least Kelly hasn’t had to worry about visa approvals and airline tickets this time around, and he’s happy not to have tried to livestream the Festival. “Our experience with livestreaming wasn’t the happiest, but the pre-recorded videos are beautiful, and it’s all free. This is our gift to Cleveland and to the whole world, and we’re hoping for an even broader footprint and exposure.”

Donations to the Festival, Kelly said, are “more than welcome. The organization has 501(c)(3) not-for-profit status, and funds will be divvied up among the artists.”

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