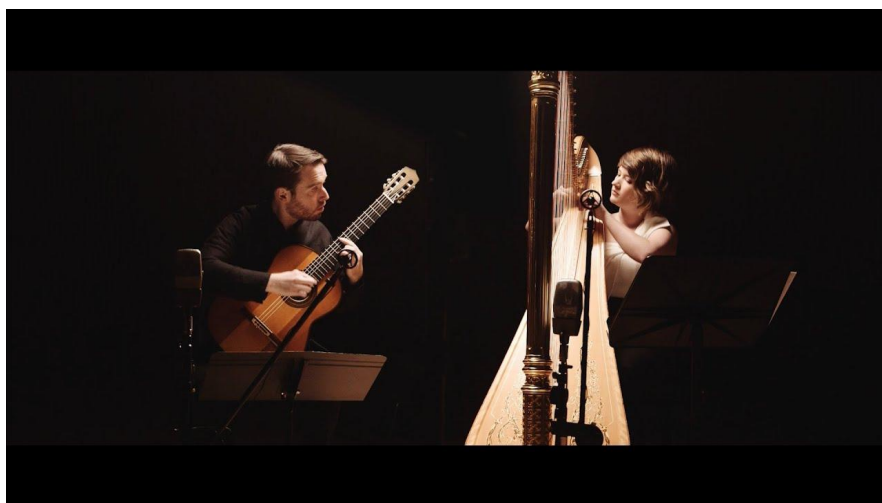


## Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival: a guitarist, a harpist, two dogs & a composer

by Jarrett Hoffman



One by one the guest list for a recent Zoom conversation grew, until it included — in order of appearance — a guitarist and a harpist, two dogs, and a composer.

I knew about the instrumentalists going in. CIM guitar department co-head Colin Davin was staying at the home of his

friend and collaborator Emily Levin, principal harp of the Dallas Symphony. So it would only make sense to chat with them together about their Davin-Levin Duo program coming up on Friday, June 3 at 7:30 pm at CIM's Kulas Hall, presented as part of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival (tickets [here](#)).

The dogs and the composer? Those surprise guest spots — the good kind — unfolded after I asked the duo about one selection on their program: *Wanderlust*, a piece that Davin and Levin commissioned from Jonathan Cziner.

They turned to each other. "Let's go get him," Davin said.

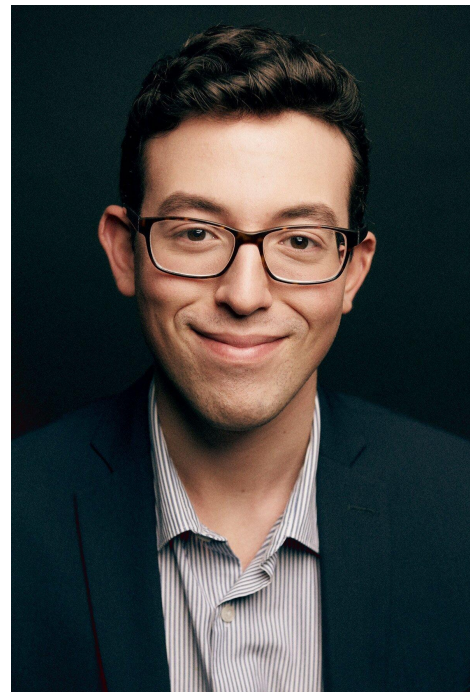
First came Charlie and JoJo, led into the room in single file by Levin, who instructed them to look at the camera and say hello. Then came Cziner, who did so without needing to be told.

Cziner, it turned out, is Levin's husband. "So I know her pretty well," he said with a laugh.

One thing he *didn't* know before this commission was how to write for guitar. “This was my first time, which was scary, but I had a nice friend here to help,” Cziner said. He recalled asking Davin about repertoire he should study and receiving a stack of scores and recordings. Cziner dug in — something that resulted in a smooth workshopping phase with the guitarist.

“I found that because John studied so well, there were only one or two things that might've been unplayable, and that's a really high rate of playability for a first-time guitar composer,” Davin said.

As for harp — another instrument that is notoriously difficult for composers to grasp — Cziner has had plenty of experience writing for Levin over the years. “And any time I have a question, it's a matter of walking into the other room and asking her, is this playable?”



Like many pieces written in pandemic years, *Wanderlust* had to sit in waiting for some time before seeing the light of day. The premiere was moved back from the 2020 Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival until December 2021, at a concert where you could say postponement was a bit of a theme. This was the long-delayed release concert for the Davin-Levin Duo's debut album *Banter*, which had come out in April 2020 — “also great timing,” the guitarist said.

“I wrote the piece at the beginning of the pandemic,” Cziner said. “And in a way, the title speaks for itself — wanting to get back out into the world.” But it was also influenced by two figures. One was Franz Schubert, both rhythmically and in the idea of the wanderer, a subject that the composer famously explored. The other, not surprisingly, was Emily Levin.

“We were stuck in the same place, living together for the first time,” Cziner said. “And I always think of her as a wanderlust — she likes to travel, likes to go places.” Levin nodded happily in agreement.

Cziner's commission is one of five pieces on the program, the other four being Davin's and Levin's arrangements of works by Philip Glass (*Etude No. 6*), Florence Price (*Three Roses*), Claude Debussy (*Suite Bergamasque*), and György Ligeti (*Musica Ricercata*).

For each piece they arrange, either Davin or Levin takes the role of primary arranger. “We ask each other questions along the way,” Davin said. “Is this possible? Could this be done better? Invariably though, when we bring things together in person, we kind of shuffle things around — add effects, change octaves, sometimes even switch who has the melody. So it starts one-sided and becomes very collaborative.”

Levin brought up some of the little details that can be difficult to get right in an arrangement. “Like the way you space chords,” she said. “It’s so intuitive to me on the harp, and it’s totally different on the guitar. So even figuring out tiny things like what note should go on what instrument, which register speaks better on which instrument — it’s fascinating to see how many differences there are.”

In closing, I congratulated Davin on the news that this fall, he’ll take up the position of Guitar Studio Director and Associate Professor of Guitar at Shenandoah Conservatory in Virginia. Sadly for Clevelanders, that means he’ll be moving to Virginia — though it won’t affect the duo since they’ve been long-distance for so long already.

Still, there’s one change Levin is holding out for. “The only thing he needs to do is get a harp car,” she said — noting that in the area of large-instrument transportation, her Outback handily beats his Corolla.

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