

23rd Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival Opens at CIM This Weekend

by Daniel Hathaway



When I telephoned Armin Kelly, founder and artistic director of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival, to hear details of their 23rd trip around the Sun from June 1-4 at the Cleveland Institute of Music, he was deep into proofreading the

40-page festival program — and worrying as all presenters of international artists do about what could possibly happen to his best-laid plans this year.

A sudden resurgence of COVID? A Visa snafu? “The volcanic eruption in Mexico scares me — could that disrupt international flights? Ah, the joys and white knuckles of presenting live concerts,” Kelly mused. He added one of the recurring nightmares of an English literature major to the list: he’s just sure there’s a typo or misspelling lurking somewhere undetected in a corner of the program book, only to reveal itself once hundreds of copies have been printed..

Casting those cares aside, Kelly said he’s very proud of that book and its “amazing” program notes by Tom Poore. “His musical insights and human interest comments have been an important part of the festival since the beginning.”

Another thing he's proud of is the inclusion of the James Stroud International Youth Competition in the adult competition for the second time. The final round will be held live for the first time on Sunday evening of the festival weekend.

Kelly said that the Stroud, the most prestigious youth competition in the world, will not only show off the incredible facility of 15 young virtuosi ages 13-18 on their instruments, but we'll be hearing the results of their musical instruction in their phrasing, nuances, and subtleties. "They're not just playing the notes, they're making beautiful, beautiful music, while conducting themselves so professionally and with great poise and composure. To see the art form evolve like this over my lifetime — that's what drives us all."

Kelly is also proud of the roster of artists who will be giving recitals, master classes, and lectures next weekend. "Our mature artists have all been here before. There's no game playing, just artistic accomplishment, and they're all good teachers — not every fine artist is a good teacher. They're happy to be here and enjoying each other's company. It's a fun time, four non-stop days, but I need a summer to recuperate afterwards!"

I asked Armin Kelly what he finds particularly exciting about this year's programming, and he immediately responded that the Festival is moving from solo concerts in the direction of small chamber groupings.



"Jason Vieaux and Mari Sato are going to rock the house with the second half of the first concert, which is all Piazzolla. The Patterson/Sutton cello and guitar Duo — they're husband and wife — played here last year and were fantastic. Juilliard has been touring them all over, including Afghanistan." The popular Italian guitar duo Solo Duo will perform on Saturday evening.

Baroque lutenist Nigel North, who has been a regular fixture of the Festival, will play an all-Bach program on Saturday afternoon. Kelly said that "North has just completed what is probably going to be his last recording, a 2-CD set of all of J.S. Bach's lute music" (or as North has it, his 'so-called Lute Works,' Bach apparently never having played the instrument).

"And of course, our dear friend Petra Polácková, who has a tremendous following in Cleveland, will be there with a Friday night program called 'Fantasies and Variations,'" Kelly said. "That includes works from Dowland to Manuel Maria Ponce's *Variations sur Folia de España et Fugue*, a gigantic 25-minute piece which is sometimes called the

Hammrklavier of the classical guitar literature. I've been after her for years to perform it here and make a video, and that's finally going to happen."

This year will also see the return of Hao Yang as a fully developed artist. "She came here pre-Covid with her dad when she was 15 or 16 and studying at the Curtis Institute with Jason Vieaux and David Starobin and played what may have been her first full-length concert," Kelly said.

The Festival will also feature a series of four lectures by Johnathan Leathwood, "three of them on Bach. He's absolutely brilliant and an amazing lecturer, as well as a certified Alexander technique teacher who will give a workshop on Sunday."

Finally, for those who want to fine-tune their ears to different examples of the luthiers' art, Cleveland guitarist Robert Gruca will perform musical excerpts comparing and contrasting eight classical guitars on Saturday afternoon.

Next week we'll speak with James Stroud about the youth competition, whose semi-final rounds are scheduled for Saturday morning and afternoon, and the final round of which will close the Festival on Sunday evening. Those events and all recital programs will take place in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Click [here](#) for more information and to purchase tickets.

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