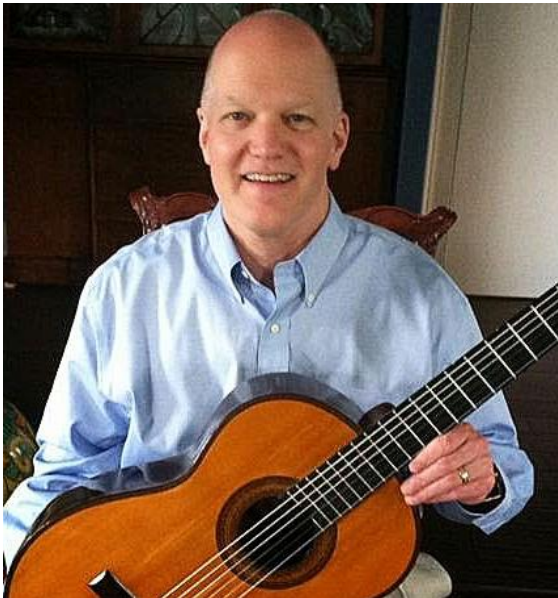


## A Conversation with James Stroud About His Youth Guitar Competition

by Daniel Hathaway



On Sunday, June 4, after all the professional classical guitarists have played their recitals at the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival, the next generation of artists will take over Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

The semi-final rounds of the James Stroud Youth Competition are scheduled for Saturday morning and afternoon, June 3m and the final round will close the Festival on Sunday evening, June 4. Fifteen young musicians will play on Saturday, and the remaining four will perform in the final round on Sunday evening at 6:30. The final round is free, and will be available on a [live stream](#).

On Wednesday, I spoke to James Stroud, the generous founder of the Stroud Competition as he was packing to travel to Cleveland, to ask how arrangements were shaping up for the Youth Competition this weekend.

*James Stroud:* I live in Montana now and so I'm getting ready to fly into Cleveland tonight for the festival, but taking care of a lot of logistics, so it's been a little busier than normal, but all in all, very good.

*Daniel Hathaway:* Great. It's a bit different from doing everything via videotapes, isn't it?

*JS:* Yes, but you know, I felt really good that we handled this competition even during COVID when the classical music scene was totally shut down in '20 and '21. In fact, We were the only competition that went forward in 2020, and one of the few that did it in 2021. Because we held it virtually, it wasn't nearly as satisfying, But we did it and felt good about it.

*DH:* Terrific. You seem to have a really good field of competitors this time.

*JS:* You know, each year the level of competition has gotten better and better, and this year in particular, both Armin Kelly and I were commenting that the level of playing is the best it's ever been. Last year I could predict who would probably make the finals. This year I have no idea because, there're so many new entrants that are very, very strong. And, you know, you have 14 year olds playing advanced repertoire, and they're not worrying about the notes, they're worrying about interpretation, which is really extraordinary.

*DH:* Yes, Armin was very impressed by that and their composure onstage.

*JS:* So I have no idea who will get to the finals. But all the kids that we picked for the semifinals, of which there's 15 of them, were just excellent across the board. No weak links anywhere.

And this time of year, it's beautiful in Cleveland around University Circle, so it should be a perfect venue. I had teachers around the country wanting me to hold the competition at their university, but being from the Cleveland area originally, having my business there, and already planning to go to Armin's Festival at CIM in Mixon Hall... There's just no venue more beautiful that I can imagine.

The kids loved it last year. We even had a world-class artist like Petra Poláčková say that the finals which she was judging last year were among the best finals she ever heard. And these are high school kids.

*DH:* What are the repertoire requirements for the competition?

*JS:* For the prelims, they had to submit two five-minute videos, one of which had to include Bach or Scarlatti to reveal their technical ability, memory, and interpretation. Then in the second round, they have to play 15 minutes of music in at least two different styles of their choice. And then I commissioned a 3-minute set piece for the semifinals that they also have to play. They'd never seen it or heard it before they were sent the music two months ago to learn. This way they can't go to YouTube or their teacher can't teach it to them.

This year the composer was Stephen Aron, who teaches at the Oberlin Conservatory. He was my master's degree teacher back in the early 80s when I attended the University of Akron. *Past Darkly* is rhythmically challenging, and they definitely have to interpret it with the mood and the way the music is put together. So for the finals, they have to play

18 minutes of music all from memory in three different style periods. So it could be Baroque, it could be Classical Romantic, early 20th century, modern day, Renaissance, anything in between.

These are the most strenuous requirements of any high school competition for classical guitar in the world. And it also offers the highest prize money of any competition in the world.

I want the judging to be as objective as possible. From the prelims all the way to the final, the judges can't discuss who they think should win. They can only send the information to me by secret ballot. We had five judges in the prelims, of which I was one, and then we have seven different judges for the semifinal, which includes Stephen Aron, who wrote the set piece.

For that round, they just have to give me who their four finalist picks are, but they don't see how other people are voting. We'd love to discuss these kids, but I can't allow that. And then for the finals, we're using seven different judges and we're going to do it the same way. They all listen to everyone play and then they have to write down who is their number one choice for first prize.

After that I ask them their overall choice for second prize, which they have to write on a piece of paper, give it to me, and I tally the results. That's how we did it last year and the year before and the result was unanimous. It's not as fun because you don't get to talk as much, but it really is the best way to do it.

We're going to have it live streamed Sunday night at 6.30. We're just trying to get as big an audience as possible.

I'd just say that the winners are all pursuing amazing things in life. Like the first kid who won it right now is getting a dual degree at the University of Texas in music and aeronautical engineering. The second kid who won it is going to Yale and studying math and music simultaneously. The third kid who won it, Eric, from last year, is going to Stanford and getting a degree in astrophysics and at the same time getting a music degree at San Francisco Conservatory. So these kids are really focused, motivated, hardworking, intelligent, and they're not resting on their laurels. They're out to change the world.

*DH:* Makes you feel like an underachiever, doesn't it?

*JS:* Yes, it does. I got a music degree from a state school and I like to think that I'm reasonably intelligent, but what these kids are doing is amazing, and a credit to their

parents as well. One of the things that was so fun about having them come to Cleveland last year was getting to know the parents. Then you really get a sense of why the kids are so special, because the parents are so dedicated to giving their kids the best opportunities, but they also seem to find that powerful balance of demanding excellence from their kids but still letting them be kids.

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