

## Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival marks its 24th season this weekend at CIM

by Daniel Hathaway



From Thursday, June 6 through Sunday, June 9 the Cleveland Institute of Music will host the 24th edition of the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival. Presented by Guitars International, the Festival features a rich mix of recitals, master classes, and lectures by eminent guitarists, bracketed by the fourth annual James Stroud Youth Competition. In a telephone conversation earlier this week, founder and artistic director Armin Kelly said, “It’s a lot of work and a lot of worry, but I love it.”

Considering the festival’s many moving parts, only one complication arose this time around that required quick action on Kelly’s part. “We did have one concert artist we were hoping to bring this year, who a week or two ago informed us that their U.S. visa had been denied. Fortunately, we had another guitarist who lives in Colorado we were planning on bringing next year who we were able to move up to this year.”

That problem having been solved, I asked Kelly what particularly excites him about this year’s lineup. “Obviously, the festival reflects my taste,” he said, “but the individual refinement of our artists is, I think, quite special.”

The Festival gets underway on Thursday evening with a program featuring two celebrated local musicians. “Jason Vieaux will be playing solo works from the traditional classical guitar repertoire, including a big suite by J.S. Bach and a wonderful Sonatina by Manuel Ponce,” Kelly said. “Then the second half is devoted to music for violin and guitar with his colleague Mari Sato. They will be doing two big works, the best-known

being Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata, which works really well on the violin, followed by *Twist*, an exciting and fun piece that was written for Jason by Vivian Fung."

The solo recital by Nicolò Spera on Friday evening will include two large and famous works based on a repeating bass figure. "We're very excited that Nicolò will be joining us and beginning his program with his transcription of the Passacaglia from Bieber's *Mystery Sonatas* on his ten-string guitar. I've watched videos of his performance, and it's really stunning. Then he'll be playing a large contemporary piece that was written for him by Giacomo Susani which will certainly be a premiere for Cleveland, and he'll follow that in the second half with the famous Chaconne by J.S. Bach."

The third Italian artist in a row will perform on Saturday evening. "Lorenzo Micheli is one half of the very famous Solo Duo," Kelly said. "He'll be playing transcriptions of works by Schubert and Debussy, and ending the second half with *Nocturnal*, a masterpiece by Benjamin Britten that was written for Julian Bream."

Kelly said that he was excited to re-invite one of last year's finds. "The young Chinese classical guitarist Hao Yang really knocked the socks off of everyone, not only with her virtuosity, which is second to none, but with her artistry, which is really profound. She just won the Koblenz Classical Guitar Festival in Germany, which is one of the top classical guitar competitions in the world."

Her program includes works by Anton Diabelli, Felix Mendelssohn, and Robert Schumann, as well as a Toccata by J.S. Bach, "and then this tremendous work that Julian Bream referred to as the greatest contemporary piece for guitar — Nicholas Maw's *Music of Memory*."

Kelly has also reinvited an old friend of the Festival. "We'll be following up with Petra Poláčková who is originally from the Czech Republic, though she has studied and lives in Austria. She will be playing a concert of primarily Czech composers, as well as a large work, *St. Wenceslas Suite 2020*, that was written for her by Michal Hromek. She's such a moving player and wonderful teacher, and we're delighted to have her back."

I ended our conversation by asking about the James Stroud Youth Competition, which begins the Festival with the semi-final round on Thursday and concludes it with the final round on Sunday evening.

"We have 15 semi-finalists ages 13 to 18 from all over the United States coming to compete here. The level of these students every year is just amazing and we're so delighted that the future of the classical guitar looks very, very bright," Kelly said.

“Many thanks to Jim Stroud for making this possible. It’s been a pleasure to work with him on this festival, which will be the fifth edition of the Stroud Competition. It was unfortunate when we first started the competition that the pandemic had just hit and so we had to do all the selections by video. But in the last few years, the semi-finalists have come to Cleveland, and that’s been great fun. Those who don’t make the final round can participate in master classes by our concert artists.”

For more information and tickets, please visit the Festival website [here](#).

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