

Piano Days 2025: two weeks, six international pianists, and many creative performances

by Stephanie Manning



As the hosts of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Piano Cleveland spends plenty of time promoting traditional classical repertoire. But their other programming, like the summer festival Piano Days, focus on celebrating the instrument in all its forms.

“We say this all the time — piano is the most accessible instrument,” Piano Cleveland executive director Marissa Moore said. “Our real goal in programming a festival like this is always to push the boundaries of what people think of when they think about classical music.”

The 2025 edition of Piano Days, which will take place at venues across the area from July 20 through August 2, features six musicians who champion crossovers in genre, presentation, and cultural influence. Tickets are available [online](#).

The festival kicks off with **The 5 Browns**, who will bring their program “The Edge of the World” to Playhouse Square’s Mimi Ohio Theater on Sunday, July 20. “Many people have been familiar with The 5 Browns since they were kids,” Moore said, referring to the sibling quintet’s appearances in *People* magazine and on *Oprah* in the early 2000s.



“They think about approaching classical music in a really dynamic and fresh way,” she said. The group’s repertoire for five pianos covers everything from Nico Muhly’s concerto *Edge of the World* to George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. “We’ll be having videography happening at all times with

a screen, so no matter where you're sitting, you'll be able to really get that dynamic experience."



Up next on Tuesday, July 22 is **Utsav Lal**, often dubbed the "Raga Pianist" for his piano interpretations of classical Indian ragas. "He's an artist who's really taking his heritage and expanding how people think about it," Moore said.

Presented in partnership with the Federation of India Community Associations (FICA) of Northeast Ohio, the performance at Gilmour

Academy's Dodoro Center will also include a catered dinner and educational component. "Young piano students can come on stage and learn something from Utsav, then get some food, and then come to the show. We're really excited about that."

Mirabelle Kajenjeri, one of the semi-finalists from last year's Piano Competition, will also present a program that represents her heritage. "Resonating Roots: My Story Through Sound" — presented on Thursday, July 24 at the Cleveland Institute of Music's Mixon Hall — features works by Ukrainian composers and improvisations on traditional Burundian songs.



"This recital was actually something she pitched to us during her competition interview," Moore said. "So we reached out to her and said, 'Hey, here's your chance.'"

She added that one of Piano Cleveland's priorities is supporting their past competition laureates — including those from more than 20 years ago. **Kotaro Fukuma**, the 2003



First Prize winner, will present "Shimmering Water — 洗" on Thursday, July 31 at Mixon Hall. This recital juxtaposes works by contemporary Japanese composers with selections of French Impressionist music.

"He does a really beautiful job of programming things so that contemporary music feels really fresh and exciting and not scary," Moore said. On

Tuesday, July 29, Fukuma will also present a sound installation at the Cleveland Museum of Art as part of their current exhibit on Takashi Murakami. Those selections will be “more inspired by the popular side of Japanese music, because it speaks more to Murakami’s aesthetic.”

The organization has partnered with the Museum of Art before, but this year’s Piano Days marks their first collaboration with Dobama Theater. On Saturday, July 26 and Sunday, July 27, Detroit-based pianist **BLKBOK** will perform his program “Shadows X Light” at that venue.



“I think there’s a lot of resonances with the Theater’s mission and what BLKBOK really cares about, in terms of the power to unite people through art,” Moore said. “A lot of his shows weave in projections and poetry and storytelling with his own compositions, as well as doing twists on classical compositions and contemporary music like rap and hip-hop.”



Natalie Tenenbaum’s show “The Piano // Re-Imagined” will also incorporate projections and lighting design. This performance will close out the festival on August 2 at Playhouse Square’s Hanna Theatre. Tenenbaum often uses live electronics, and “she’s usually mixing in real time, which is very cool,” Moore said. “It’s a totally different approach to art making than you would typically see in a classical recital.”

During the festival’s run, Piano Cleveland will also host community events including masterclasses, workshops, and outdoor performances at places like Crocker Park and the Van Aken District. On July 23, Mirabelle Kajenjeri will appear on Wade Oval Wednesdays to perform with students from the Hryhory Kytasty Cleveland School of Bandura — showcasing the sound of the traditional Ukrainian instrument.

“Highlighting how international Cleveland is” — to both the pianists and audiences — “is always a surprise and a delight,” Moore said. “We feel lucky that we get to make those connections.”

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