

Piano Days: for “Raga Pianist” Utsav Lal, the challenge is its own reward

by Stephanie Manning



When Utsav Lal first received a performance offer from Piano Cleveland, he was pleasantly surprised. “I know the bulk of their work involves pretty straight-ahead classical piano and the Competition,” he said in a recent interview. “I do things a little differently, so it’s nice that they’re interested in what I’ve been working on.”

Lal, often nicknamed the “Raga Pianist,” is known for his interpretations of classical

Indian ragas, bringing the centuries-old form to the Western piano. On Tuesday, July 22, he’ll showcase that distinct approach at Gilmour Academy’s Dodoro Center as part of the 2025 Piano Days series. Tickets are available [online](#).

The concert, presented in partnership with the Federation of India Community Associations (FICA) of Northeast Ohio, is just one part of a three-part evening. Before Lal takes the stage at 7:30 pm, attendees can learn something new from an educational workshop at 6:00 and enjoy a catered dinner at 6:30.

The pianist said that although these additions were Piano Cleveland’s idea, he’s always happy to interact with the audience and answer their questions. “It depends on who’s asking, but a lot of them are curious about the process of translating this music to the piano,” he said. His instrument, which uses equal temperament rather than just intonation, also lacks an easy way to bend notes — and those challenges are exactly why he likes it.

Knowing that a completely accurate piano performance of a raga is impossible, “I think the fun is in trying to aim for it as close as you can, while knowing that it’s never actually going to be achieved,” he said. “And seeing what kind of smoke and mirrors and pianistic expression you can use to convey the same thing.”

While the basic outline of the recital is in place, the choices of ragas will be more of a game-time decision. "I like leaving the choice of which raga until a couple of days before or sometimes until I get to the venue," he said. "Certain ones just feel better in certain rooms and at certain times."

To begin the evening, the pianist will present a raga in the style of Alap-Jod-Jhala, a traditional three-part exploratory form where the musical material of the raga is gradually developed. Then, tabla player Nitin Mitta will join Lal to perform a raga in a fixed compositional form called a Gat. Both musicians will have opportunities to solo and improvise, returning to the fixed composition from time to time.

Mitta is "one of my closest collaborators," Lal said. "He's very sensitive in terms of different musical styles — just communicating and following each other wherever we end up going."

The concert will close with a selection of some semi-classical compositions, influenced by the pianist's different tastes. "I do a lot of experimental improvisation and jazz, and I love a lot of music from minimalism to different pianistic and folk music styles," he said. "It's nice to see how those things can talk to each other."

During his visit to Cleveland, the pianist will get to play around with another one of his favorite genres: Irish traditional music. His group Reverie Road will perform at the [Cleveland Irish Cultural Festival](#) on July 18, 19 and 20. "I lived in Ireland for four years and Scotland for four years and ended up playing a lot of Irish music over there, and I really loved that style of music," Lal said.

While he's done his own project called "Ragas to Reels" that explores the connection points between the two styles, Reverie Road is a more straightforward program of Irish traditional music with his friends and colleagues. In other words, "It could not be more different than what I will play at Piano Days."

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