

Petra Polácková returns to her “second home”

By Mike Telin



“I remember coming to the U.S. for the first time to play in the Cleveland Festival,” Petra Polácková recalled during a Zoom conversation. “That was twelve years ago. I remember Armin Kelly waiting for me at the airport — we were all super excited and of course, super nervous.”

On Sunday, June 7 at 4:00 pm in Mixon Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Polácková will make her tenth appearance at the Cleveland International Classical Guitar Festival. Jonathan Leathwood will give a free pre-concert talk at 3:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

In addition to the Festival, Polácková has also returned to record videos for Guitars International. “This might be my 12th time in Cleveland, so nowadays it’s like coming home for the annual meeting of the family. I can’t

imagine not being in Cleveland at least once a year.”

The guitarist said that the origins of her setlist began to take shape when she was asked to play a Spanish program for a Rodrigo anniversary festival.

“As you know, I’m not really a Rodrigo player. But I’m often asked to play early music.” The first half of Polácková’s program, which she’s titled *The Art of Polyphony*, will open with Luis de Narvaez’s *Cancion del Emperador*. “I like to have songs on my programs.” And the composer’s *O Gloriosa Domina*, of which she said the variations are like a medieval chant.

When thinking about other pieces to include that would create a through-line in the program, she realized that 2026 marks the 400th anniversary of the death of John

Dowland, so she's including *Farewell*, P3, *A Fancy*, P6, and *Fantasia* (tremolo), P73. "It's nice because these have the same tuning as the Narvaezs, so I can play all the pieces attacca." She noted that the same tuning will also carry over into J.S. Bach's *Prelude & Fuga*, BWV 997.

She has titled the second half Love, Life, and Death. "The idea is to create a farewell with pieces that are connected to death, such as an Elegy, an Homage, or Bach's Chaconne." She said that Dowland's *Farewell*, while not exactly connected to death, is connected with the Renaissance idea of Come Heavy Sleep and Semper Dowland (Semper Dolens).

"This metaphor for the fashion of being sad, but at the same time, when something dies, something is born is connected with other pieces on the program like Fredrico Moreno-Torroba's *Noctorno* and *Castles of Spain*, which are very colorful and very lively and very energetic. So it's this circle of dying and being born — that's why I did not want to make it too heavy, with too many elegies and too many farewells and lacrimae.

Polácková said that Jeremy Collins' *Elegy* is difficult to pair with other works because of its atypical scordatura. "I will be using another guitar, so I will have three instruments on the stage. And not to interrupt the flow of the music, the Collins pairs really well with Torroba's *Nocturne* because it has this idea of going to sleep."

She said that everybody will be able to find a story in Collins' work. "I have my personal one, which is really connected with love and life and death."

Polácková noted that Jeremy Collins studied classical guitar with Jason Vieaux at the Cleveland Institute of Music, a fact she discovered long after she was introduced to the work by her teacher, Paolo Pegoraro.

"He would send me videos saying this is a really nice piece, and it would be really nice to hear me play it. I also heard it on the Guitar Foundation of America's videos. So that's how I discovered it."

Although Polácková had forgotten about the piece, she was reminded of it when a friend included it on a program. "Nowadays you can buy scores online. So I went to Jeremy Collins' website and bought the score and learned it during the New Year's holiday."

The guitarist will close her program with J.S. Bach's Chaconne from the violin sonata No. 2.

In addition to performing and presenting master classes, Polácková will also serve on the jury for the final round of the James Stroud Classical Guitar Competition, a job she said is not easy. "In the past few years, not only in the Cleveland competition, but in general,

it's gotten to be a really difficult task because the level of the players has become really high.”

The guitarist said that one challenge in judging a competition is that many of the competitors play the same pieces. “It’s like a tradition — if this guy won this competition with these pieces, I’m going to pick the same pieces because I might also be successful with them. So sitting on the jury you might hear one work seven times and technically played on a very high level, but do the performances have artistry and an understanding of the scores?”

Polácková said that it is also difficult to know if a winner is someone who is going to stay with the guitar or even stay with music. She noted that [Eric Wang](#), the 2022 first prize winner, was somebody she was certain she would see in the future onstage.

“I was judging the Denver competition, and I heard two former participants in the James Stroud Competition and they were doing a wonderful job. And I remember Patricia Hernandez, who never won the first prize in Cleveland, but now she took first prize in Denver and has become a wonderful musician.”

Polácková pointed out that the same could be said about Kaz Hudson, who won first prize at the Stroud in 2023 and also won the first prize in Denver.

“He’s not only a guitarist but a musician too — and a wonderful person with knowledge about music. And of course it’s always really nice to see that the younger generation is still playing classical guitar.”

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