

Lancaster International Piano Festival to move online this summer

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In years past, the Lancaster International Piano Festival would gather some of the world's best classical musicians to Lancaster for a week of music. This year, the festival moves online for the first time.

By the middle of March, Xun Pan settled into an unfortunate weekly routine: wake up, check email and find that yet another piano performance or master class had been cancelled due to rising fears regarding COVID-19.

"Right now, I have no concerts until August, so there's nothing I need to practice anymore," Pan says. "I still practice, just not for anything immediate."

At this point, Pan, a piano professor at Millersville University, was deep into planning the ninth annual Lancaster International Piano Festival, a yearly gathering of some of the best classical musicians on the planet that he co-directs with fellow pianist Ivo Kaltchev. As classes at Millersville made the switch from in-person to online and music festivals across the globe started announcing cancellations, a thought came to Pan.

"I'm thinking, 'Hey, we can actually use this online teaching method, but for the festival,'" Pan says.

For nearly a decade, the Lancaster International Piano Festival, or LIPF, has drawn musicians from nearly every corner of the planet for a week's worth of recitals, master classes and competitions. The festival prides itself on having relatively low barriers of entry for students of any age and skill level. Last year saw 85 students attend from nine different countries, from kindergartners to doctorate students.

One of the many returning faculty members this year is Hedi Salanki-Rubardt, who teaches a number of different music programs at the University of West Florida.

"Xun really created something special with this festival," Salanki-Rubardt says. "Every year when I go, I think, 'My goodness, how great this was.'"

In past years, Salanki-Rubardt would often start the days events with a Kodály Method Solfege, which is a form of music education that combines singing exercises and hand movements.

"That was always very special because, during the class, I was able to work with so many students from all over the world," Salanki-Rubardt says. "I think I will miss that part of the festival very much."

Festival changes

Changes this year are somewhat obvious - both instructors and students will be participating from the comfort of their own homes or studios. The festival will still take place during its initially-scheduled time frame of Friday, July 17 through Sunday, July 26, but lessons will take place through video conference. Applications are required before Wednesday, July 1.

For the competition part of the festival, new categories have been opened up to draw in more participants. The three categories are "Young Artist," for ages up through age 35, "Junior," for ages up through 16 and "Amateur" for ages 30 and up. Applicants will have through Saturday, August 1, to enter, and winners will be revealed on Thursday, August 20.

Entrants in the competition will be posted on YouTube, or, for participants based in China where Google websites are banned, Youku.

"Since some participants are using different technologies and some are performing in a range of different time zones, so we wanted to make sure the sound quality didn't suffer," Pan says.

The festival's website notes that participants must upload unedited video that shows both their face and hands, though Pan notes that the likelihood of cheating is very low.

For the public at large, one of the biggest changes to the festival schedule is a lack of public concerts for Lancastrians to attend. However, Pan says that he has reached out to a number of

past festival guests, who will record short concerts that will then be shared on the festival's websites and social media channels.

Musicians the world over are tinkering with their best-laid plans, attempting to bridge the sometimes cold digital divide to provide a warmth that only music can instill. However, both Pan and Salanki-Rubardt are already looking forward to next year's festival, when teachers, students and longtime friends through music can be in one another's company again.

"It's not like you leave [the festival] behind when it's over," Salanki-Rubardt says. "You take it with you for the rest of the year."