

Howland hosts first digital accordion symposium

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Tribune Chronicle / Andy Gray Joseph Natoli of Howland demonstrates the capability of a digital accordion. Natoli is cofounder of IDEAS (International Digital Electronic Accordion Society), and the group will host its first symposium starting Wednesday at the Avalon Inn and Resort.



HOWLAND — When Joseph Natoli plays his accordion, it doesn't sound anything like the musicians who used to be heard on *"The Lawrence Welk Show"* or those playing polkas in ethnic clubs.

Natoli, a 1971 McDonald High School graduate who lives in Howland, can make his 26-pound Roland digital accordion sound like a full orchestra on Aaron Copland's *"Fanfare for the Common Man"* or original compositions like *"Epic Cinematic Soundtrack."*

"It is one of the most expressive electronic instruments on the planet," he said.

Traditionalists disagree. Some accordion players look down on those who play electronic instruments in the same way a classical guitarist

might view an electric guitar player or a pianist may view a someone using a synthesizer.

When Michael Soloway, one of Natoli's students, registered to attend an accordion conference in Italy, he was told to bring only an acoustic accordion. Digital accordions were not welcome.

"Accordionists as a whole are put in a funny place in society in a way," Soloway said. *"To subdivide it even more didn't make sense."*

If they weren't welcome at the acoustic accordion events, they would create their own. Natoli and Soloway started with a Facebook page Gr8 IDEAS (International Digital Electronic Accordion Society), and the pair will host the first IDEAS Symposium, running Wednesday through Saturday at the Avalon Inn and Resort.

"It was Joe who said we need a representation of our own," Soloway said. *"It became like a religion to us."*

Natoli, 65, started out as a traditionalist. Both his father and grandfather were accordion players.

"I would sit at his (father's) feet when he was practicing and just loved the sound," Natoli said. *"Eventually, he took me to his teacher, and I started taking lessons and never looked back."*

In 1972, Natoli was a national champion and first runner-up internationally. He played in different bands over the years and performed regularly as part of a duo at the old Jimmy Chieffo's restaurant in Warren.

He first explored digital accordions about 10 years ago. His father was ill, and Natoli was looking for a more lightweight option so his dad could still play music. Roland sponsored a competition to win one of its digital accordions, and Natoli won.

"That was my motivation, but once I got into it I loved it," he said.

Soloway, 69, a retired cosmetic dentist who also was a professional pianist, discovered the digital accordion after seeing Natoli perform at an American Accordion Association event about five years ago. Soloway started taking lessons with Natoli via Skype and traveled to Howland on occasion for in-person lessons.

“With Skype and Zoom (video conferencing), you’re no longer limited by geographic location,” Natoli said. *“You can study with whoever you want to. Technology is making all of this possible.”*

The Facebook group, which has more than 450 members, helped them connect with like-minded musicians around the world. The first symposium will have about 50 attendees who are traveling from as far as New Zealand, Australia, Italy, Israel, Canada and Alaska.

Some of the accordionists will sit in with pianist Joe Augustine during his regular Wednesday gig at the hotel, and concerts that are open to the public are planned at 8 a.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, with evening concerts at 7:30 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Saturday. The morning programs will run about an hour while the evening performances will be about 90 minutes. Those concert will feature unique configurations of musicians using the digital accordion to play jazz, classical and other genres.

“You’re going to hear the best in the world on this instrument, people from all over the planet who are the best on this instrument,” Natoli said.

Soloway interrupted, *“And you’re looking at one of them right now. Don’t let him be modest.”*

“Our pitch is come hear some incredibly enticing music of all genres — except for polkas,” Natoli said. *“Well, you could hear a polka, but that’s not our focus.”*