A Contest Befitting Monk

Competition Shows Where Jazz Piano Is Today

By BEN RATLIFF

WASHINGTON, Oct. 15 — "Jazz" means entirely different things to different people, but there was no question about the goal of this year’s Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition. The competitors were judged as contemporary artists by contemporary artists; the criteria were hard, and the critics’ process seemed free of nostalgia and commercialism.

The competition started in 1967 and was for piano for the first three years, then started switching to a different instrument each year. Some people have grumbled that in the 1980’s Monk himself, with his slinky rhythmic technique, wouldn’t have stood a chance against a judging score card that favors an even distribution of elements like dynamics, time, swing feel and professionalism.

This year the competition circled back to the piano. The finalists’ competition on Sunday night wasn’t just surprisingly good; it was also indicative of where jazz piano is now. The Herbie clone, a pianist who wants to sound like Herbie Hancock did in the 1960’s, was a common figure among young musicians until recently. One of the judges, Eric Reed, was in the competition himself in 1983, and he remembered that the semifinals that year were full of them. But this year the pianists went in different directions. They were intensely rhythmic and experimented with time and accents; they had concise, clever arrangements.

The contest has gained nationwide recognition, growing into a two-day event at the Kennedy Center.

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The Monk competition became particularly well known in 1961, when Joshua Redman won the now-mute contest, was subsequently signed by Warner Brothers and became a minor household name. Last year's winner, Teri Thornton, got a contract with Verve in his band. The performance, however, was a notable achievement. Many of the competition's other winners, Havers, had been able to parlay their prize into much of a career.

On Saturday and Sunday representatives from only three major record labels were in town for the competition, and all their entries were overextended. More surprising, independent jazz labels were barely a presence. Perhaps that's because one can hear most of these players in a more relaxed club setting in New York. Perhaps it's because independent labels assume that the Monk competition is a major-label event. Whatever the reason, it's curious that the jazz business doesn't take more interest in its own version of the Van Cliburn.

On Saturday at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater, 12 of the 200 pianists who submitted tapes this year performed for the judges and an audience, who could wander in to see and listen. Many of the musicians were contracted and proper, and their up-tempo pieces — one was even required in each set, along with a medium-tempo and a ballad — tended toward empty show. One pianist inserted a made-for-note Art Tatum solo into his set; the panel recognized it, and that was that. Another pianist, technically precocious, sounded too much like Oscar Peterson, though it escaped no one that something like Oscar Peterson isn't easy. A handful stood out. Orin Evans, an iconoclastic Philadelphia pianist, is in the finals of the Monk competition at the Kennedy Center.

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Gore gives a talk, Alt RIGHT gives a party, and Cosby gives awards.

The contest was a solo slow blues, and he strode a little with his left hand, building up a climax. His second piece was Monk's "Green Chimneys," a minimal, declarative tune that rhythm sections love, and he used his own time-lagging introduction. Again he built it up gradually, grabbing fists of notes and giving volume; this time the audience burst into cheers during his crescendo.

"I got spiritual and emotional at that point," Mr. Lewis said later, standing alone backstage and gathering himself for a laugh. "I was so happy. I had made some interesting choices: he allowed a drum solo, which no other finalist had done, and he was barely using his left hand, building up harmony more than ever. But the rhythm section got away from him, and his second piece, Monk's "Rhythm-a-Ning," lost focus.

Mr. Lewis is tall and thin, and he has a heavy sound on the keyboard. On Saturday he came on too strong, competing with the music with dynamic sound. But in the finals he gave a more balanced performance. His first piece, Monk's "Blue Monk," was a solo slow blues, and he strode a little with his left hand, building up a climax. His second piece was Monk's "Green Chimneys," a minimal, declarative tune that rhythm sections love, and he used his own time-lagging introduction. Again he built it up gradually, grabbing fists of notes and giving volume; this time the audience burst into cheers during his crescendo.

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After an intermission, there was an all-star concert loosely dedicated to Herbie Hancock, who received the Monk Institute's Founder's Award. The Institute is partly based in Los Angeles, where it directs educational programs around the world and is a constituent of the Music Center of Los Angeles County (along with the Los Angeles Philharmonic), and this was an experiment in contemporary jazz. It used some good musicians and some good ones, including Grover Washington Jr., Arturo Sandoval, Wayne Shorter and Michael Brecker, but it was a bit noisy and rhythmically challenged. The high point was Steve Wonder playing "Our Love" on electric piano; interesting for Mr. Wonder, but any of the four finalists could have played it better.

Vice President Gore delivered a speech about jazz and America, and Bill Cosby distributed the awards. Mr. Lewis won, with Mr. Evans, Mr. Sacks and Mr. Yehel coming in second and third. (Mr. Lewis's set will be broadcast on "Jazz Set With Brian Marsalis" at 8 P.M. on Sunday, Oct. 31, on WGBH, 88.5 FM, in Newark.) There was no lingering feeling that the content had anything to do with the event. But the four finalists were special musicians, and the two with the most persuasive sound came in at the top.

"Rhythm is now," boomed Randy Weston, one of the pianists, at a backstage party at the end of the night. He said, "it's being played all the time."