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Everyone's a Winner At Monk Competition But Pianist Hamasyan Takes Top Prize

By MATT SCHUDEL
Washington Post Staff Writer

For a music that usually flies beneath the radar of public notice, jazz has had some rare visibility in Washington this past week, and even a touch of glamour.

In honor of the 20th anniversary of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, festivities began Thursday with a White House celebration of America's indigenous musical art that included an East Room performance taped for PBS. It even had President Bush bobbing his head to spirited versions of "Kansas City" and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)."

On Saturday, 12 pianists faced off in the semifinals of the annual Monk competition at the National Museum of American History's Baird Auditorium. And last night at a sold-out Eisenhower Theater at the Kennedy Center, three finalists competed for \$35,000 in scholarships and the exposure that goes with winning what has become, without question, the most prestigious jazz competition in the world.

The annual contest, which rotates from one instrument to another each year, has launched the careers of such young jazz stars as Joshua Redman, Jane Monheit,

See MONK, C2, Col. 1



Tigran Hamasyan bested two other finalists last night in the culmination of the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition.

Crowd favorite Gerald Clayton earned second place in the Monk jazz competition.

Monk Fest Keeps the Jazz Beat Going

MONK, From C1

Jacky Terrasson, Lisa Henry and Gretchen Parlato, all of whom performed before and after last night's competition.

There was other star power on hand as well, from presenters Quincy Jones, Phyllicia Rashad and Billy Dee Williams. But amid the celebratory back-patting, there was a larger lesson to be learned than just having a jazzy good time. The Monk Institute has a genuinely global educational mission, which was embodied in this year's 12 piano semifinalists — who hailed from different countries. The annual composition prize went to a Hungarian, Kalman Olah.

"The philosophy of jazz represents tolerance, teamwork and inclusion," said Thelonious Monk Jr., who helped found the Washington-based institute in 1986 and is its board chairman. "That's what America is about. The music reflects that."

For Monk, the institute is a way of "taking care of my father's legacy."

His father, of course, was one of the guiding spirits of modern jazz, a fiercely original composer and pianist who didn't have megawatt jazz competitions or college jazz programs to advance his career. Instead, he came of age when jazz knowledge was passed from hand to hand and, sometimes, from father to son.

"That music was part of my DNA," said Thelonious Jr., 56, in a pre-competition interview. After playing drums with his father in the 1970s, the younger Monk had a career in R&B and rock music before putting down his sticks in the mid-1980s.

Somewhat to his surprise, after founding the institute, he began to reconnect with his jazz past, became absorbed in his father's music and formed a sizzling sextet that is one of the premier hard-bop groups in jazz today.

He also settled into a role as the loquacious frontman for the Monk Institute.

"I realized I could talk about this music," he said, "because my father had taken me everywhere and because he was like the oracle of Delphi. I said, man, that's a little gift. And gift is only a gift if you use it."

In 20 years, the Monk Institute has grown into a \$5 million entity that, against all odds, has put jazz into elementary and high school curricula



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across the country. It sponsors a two-year fellowship program for young musicians at the University of Southern California.

And, with his powers of persuasion, the younger Monk has helped bring such distinguished musicians as Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Wayne Shorter — all of whom performed at the White House and at last night's post-competition Kennedy Center jam — to schools from Miami to Alaska, and overseas from Egypt to Vietnam.

"We've been very instrumental in changing the paradigm in jazz education," Monk says. "The Monk Institute is about re-creating that interface between the older musician and the younger musician."

Which brings us back to last night's slickly produced finale, underwritten by General Motors and Northrop Grumman. With Hancock, Andrew Hill, Danilo Perez, Renée Rosnes, Billy Taylor and Randy Weston judging the piano competition, the three young finalists added their voices to a century-old jazz tradition.

The clear audience favorite was a Dutch-born Californian, Gerald Clayton, who deftly combined the second movement of Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata with John Lewis's "Django."

But the judges were more impressed with Armenian-born Tigran Hamasyan, who offered rhythmically dynamic readings of Ray Noble's "Cherokee" and Miles Davis's "Solar" to take the top prize of \$20,000. Clayton won second place, and American Aaron Parks came in third.

Whether any of these pianists develops into a star remains to be seen. But after 20 years of career-making competitions, the Monk Institute can rightfully lay claim to being biggest buzzmaker in the jazz world.