No Nonsense, a Little Scatting and Plenty of Idiosyncratic Style

WASHINGTON — Cecile McLorin Salvant, the winner of this year’s Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocal Competition, grew up in Florida with a Hanukkah-shaped cookie cutter, a French mother, but has been studying jazz for the last three years in Aix-en-Provence, France, with Jean-Pascal Niorot, a connoisseur of early scatting. As a jazz singer she seems both familiar and a future star.

About 7:30 on Sunday afternoon, she appeared on stage here at the National Museum of the American Indian, at the semfinals of the 23rd annual competition. It focuses on a different instrument every year, and the vocal contest, last won by Gretchen Parlato in 2004, has been one that the jazz world watches with particular interest. For her appearance, Ms. Salvant looked like an English teacher, wearing a sensible black dress with magenta ballet flats, a short

A young singer focuses and wins the Monk award.

She raised an octave, sang at a crawling tempo more than once, made her voice into a crooning door, a fog (she was not alone in this). She made her fingers tingle, her voice aching. She sang in a language that had never been heard before, but that is not true of the song, about refining a rough man’s advanced, into an extravaganza that is heard by the band’s players as a song, a jazz musician’s own way of expressing hisScatting.