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## No Nonsense, a Little Scatting and Plenty of Idiosyncratic Style

WASHINGTON — Cécile McLorin Salvant, the winner of this year's Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition, grew up in Florida with a

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Haitian father and a French mother, but has been studying jazz for the last three years in Aix-en-Provence, France, with Jean-François Bonnel, a connoisseur of early swing. As a jazz singer she seems both familiar and a little *recherché*.

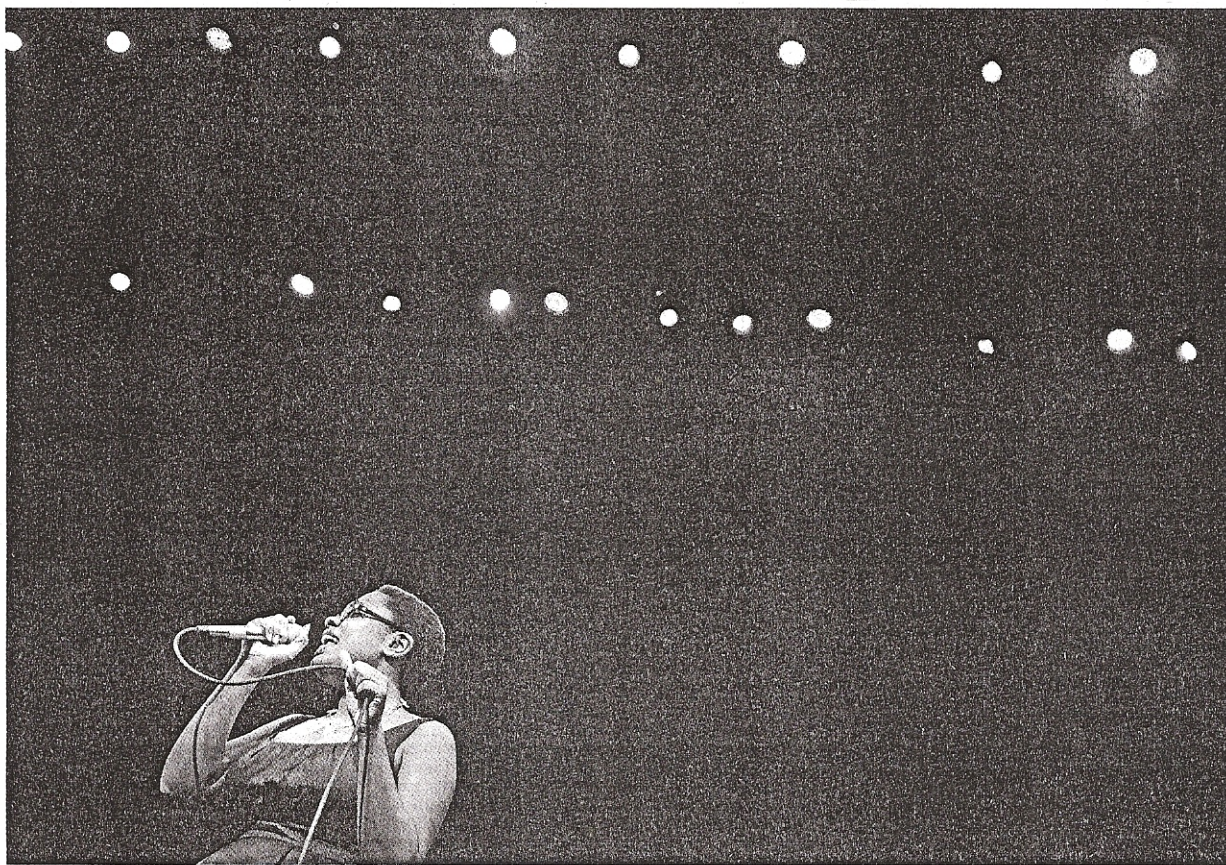
About 1:30 on Sunday afternoon, she appeared on stage here at the National Museum of the American Indian, at the semifinals of the 23rd-annual competition. It focuses on a different instrument every year, and the vocals contest, last won by Gretchen Parlato in 2004, has been one that the jazz world watches 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.**

Afro and glasses with thick brown frames. As she sang, she stared inquisitively at the house: really stared, as in "it's not polite to stare."

At first the gravity of her performance seemed like compensation for the pressure. Then she relaxed and brought out more from deeper inside. She was funny and dire and idiosyncratic, and never cutesy-flirty or mannered-hip, with qualities that made parts of the semifinals tough to sit through. As she sang her less-than-obvious set choices — a version of the bebop song "Bernie's Tune," with words by Lieber and Stoller; "Monk's Mood," by Monk, with words by the Dutch singer Soesja Citroen; and Bessie Smith's "Take It Right Back" — she stamped out the lines with authority and power and a bit of outrageousness, as if they were home truths, not history assignments.

She zeroed in on notes, sang at crawling tempos more than once, made her voice into a creaking door, a fog (a bit of Sarah Vaughan there), then a laser. She stayed on pitch and grew unnervingly quiet in the end verses of the Bessie Smith, turning the song, about refusing a rough man's advances, into an extravagant story. She put the house band's players at ease, keeping



Cécile McLorin Salvant, above, a Floridian now living in France, won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition on Monday in Washington. Charenée Wade, near right, finished second, and Cyrille Aimée, far right, was third.

close watch over solos rather than scatting through them. She seemed fresh, but also as if she had decided long ago that she was an artist.

This is how Ms. Salvant, 21, got through the first part of the competition and then, on Monday night, won the finals at the Kennedy Center here.

This year's 12 semifinalists in the competition, which is run by the Thelonious Monk Institute — culled from 237 entry tapes — yielded a range of origins and dispositions. There was a return contestant from 2004 (Charenée Wade, 28, who finished fourth six years ago and second this time, with a strong performance redolent of Betty Carter). Others included a German (Barbara Bürkle, from Stuttgart, who sang a bossa nova in Portuguese); a

Frenchwoman (the focused and playful third-place winner, Cyrille Aimée, 26, who grew up on the street in Samois-sur-Seine where Django Reinhardt retired); a music-world scion (Alexandra Isley, daughter of the R&B musician Ernie Isley); a gospel singer; and three men.

And among the judges were five eminences: Patti Austin, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Kurt Elling, Al Jarreau and Dianne Reeves. Their guidelines for evaluation included tone, intonation, pitch, dynamics, interaction with the rhythm section, and stage presence.

But not scatting, even though nearly every singer undertook it as if it were mandatory. Scatting is a tough spot: the consensual vehicle for serious vocal improvisation, and something many jazz



PHOTOGRAPHS BY DREW ANGERER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

singers feel they need to do to prove legitimacy, though there are a million ways it can sound archaic. Vaughan was everywhere across the competition, with just a touch of neo-soul and new pop mannerism creeping in now and then. (Dana Lauren, a Berklee student from Connecticut, sang a version of Corinne Bailey Rae's "Call Me When You Get This" — the newest song I heard through the whole experience.)

Ms. Salvant scattered only a lit-

tle in the semifinals, though not at the centerpiece of any song, and not at all in the finals. Apart from Vaughan, her influences seemed to come from before 1940 — Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and then a long jump to Abbey Lincoln, as if acknowledging that the styles and songbook from the decades in between had been picked over a bit too much.

Her smart ideas about repertory continued in the finals: she performed "If This Isn't Love,"

from "Finian's Rainbow," which she happened to know from a Vaughan record, and the ballad "I Wonder Where Our Love Has Gone," which was recorded by Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, though even the judges struggled to place it.

She won \$20,000 and a recording contract from the Concord Music Group — a reason for her to return to the United States, where we can use some of her judiciousness, her directness and her wide-eyed stare.