



Competition finalist Tom Oren performs during the 2018 Thelonious Monk Institute Of Jazz International Piano Competition at the Kennedy Center Eisenhower Theater on December 3, 2018 in Washington, DC. Paul Morigi/Getty Images for Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

## **TOM OREN WINS THE 2018 THELONIOUS MONK COMPETITION**

By Jamie Sandel ·  
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Tom Oren, a 24-year-old pianist from Tel Aviv, Israel, was named the winner on Monday of the 2018 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition at the Kennedy Center.

He topped two other finalists: the 21-year-old Isaiah Thompson of West Orange, N.J., who won second place, and the 31-year-old Maxime Sanchez of Toulouse, France. They'd emerged from a field of 13 semifinalists, who performed for judges and the public at the Smithsonian's Baird Auditorium on Sunday.

Oren's playing, characterized by his sensitive and fluid touch, elicited audible reactions from the audience as he blazed through a spirited version of Cole Porter's "Just One of Those Things." On "Just As Though You Were Here," a lesser-known entry in the jazz canon, he showcased a quiet intensity and attention to detail, demonstrating an independence not just between hands but between individual fingers. His delicate treatment of the ballad seemed to be built from several distinct voices, operating in tandem, each with their own feeling and direction.

His maturity was perhaps most noticeable in his interaction with his sidemen, bassist Rodney Whitaker and drummer Carl Allen. Oren's brimming energy spurred them on and challenged them, without letting the rhythmic pocket falter.

Oren will take home \$25,000 in scholarship funds, plus a recording contract with the Concord Music Group and — perhaps most significantly — the honor of joining a formidable cohort of alumni from storied event, widely considered to be the most prestigious competition in jazz.



Roberta Gambarini, left, and Dee Dee Bridgewater perform during the gala. Paul Morigi/Getty Images

Oren has, up to this point, maintained a relatively low profile on American jazz scenes. He is a member of the Eli Degibri Quartet, in addition to other Israeli groups of some international note. He studied both classical and jazz styles in Israel at the Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts, Israeli Conservatory of Music and Rimon School of Jazz and Contemporary Music. After his stint in the Israeli military, where he played in the Israeli Air Force band, he traveled to the United States to attend the Berklee College of Music on a four-year scholarship.

Thompson, the second-place winner, performed two original tunes in a style rooted in bebop, blues and stride piano. His approach was a bridge between the old and the new, hinting at a creative modern sensibility while remaining grounded in tradition. This came as no surprise to those aware of Thompson's burgeoning career as a protégé of straight-ahead titans such as Wynton Marsalis and Christian McBride. Sanchez worked in a more idiosyncratic style, bending rhythms and truncating melodic ideas at surprising moments — an approach that was at times intriguing, and less than satisfying elsewhere.

The competition's results were announced at the end of a star-studded gala concert, featuring performances by John Beasley, Ambrose Akinmusire, Melissa Aldana, Kris Bowers, Theo Croker, Roberta Gambarini, James Genus, Jimmy Heath, Lisa Henry, Jazzmeia Horn, Ledisi, Linda Oh, Adam Rodgers, Jamison Ross, Kendrick Scott and Deborah Joy Winans.



Herbie Hancock, left, and Tom Oren perform together following Oren's win. Paul Morigi/Getty Images

While this year's Monk competition featured the piano (the competition rotates instruments from year to year), the rest of the concert largely featured vocalist-fronted ensembles. The majority of the evening was dedicated to honoring the vocalists Dee Dee Bridgewater and Aretha Franklin.

Franklin, whose death in August was deeply felt by the jazz community, was memorialized with a video segment and a rollicking multi-song medley featuring four vocalists: Lisa Henry, Roberta Gambarini, Jazzmeia Horn and Ledisi. Franklin was spoken of reverently, both for her contributions to music more broadly and to the Monk Institute specifically. Chairman Herbie Hancock — a legendary pianist who **will become the Institute's new namesake next year**, in response to a request from Thelonious Monk's family — spoke to Franklin's constant support of the institute's educational efforts before announcing that the it will create a new scholarship in her memory, designed to support young vocalists.

Bridgewater, another steadfast supporter of the institute and a member of its advisory board, was presented with the competition's Maria Fisher Founder's Award. She gave a heartfelt acceptance speech that highlighted the role of mentorship — and particularly the legacy of her first musical idol, Betty Carter — in her own musical growth. That theme was driven home by the inspired renditions of songs from Bridgewater's repertoire given by other vocalists at the competition. Ledisi's performed an ecstatic take on "Try a Little Tenderness," prompting the evening's only full-on standing ovation.

The evening concluded with Oren, after his win was announced, taking the stage alongside many artists from the night to perform a rendition of Miles Davis's "Walkin'." The young pianist — surrounded by his predecessors in the a lineage of jazz greats — was beaming.