

## News

# Tom Oren Wins 2018 Monk Competition

By John Murph  
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Concord Label Group president John Burk (left), Monk Competition winner Tom Oren and Thelonious Monk Institute chairman Herbie Hancock (Photo: Steve Mundinger/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

The winner of this year's Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz competition, Tom Oren, hails from Tel Aviv, Israel—a fact that illustrates the international scope of the prestigious contest.

The Monk Competition, which returned after a two-year hiatus, was devoted to the piano for the first time since the 2011 edition. After dazzling the judges at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater in Washington,

D.C., on Dec. 3, Oren took home the first prize of a \$25,000 scholarship and guaranteed recording contract with Concord Music.

Accompanied by drummer Carl Allen and bassist Rodney Whitaker, Oren exhibited a jaunty, capricious wit on his effervescent rendition of Cole Porter's "Just One Of Those Things." Spurred by a brisk tempo, Oren offered melodically cogent, single-note runs that gave way to daredevil passages and feisty interactions during Whitkaer's bass solo, resulting in a lavish display of showmanship balanced with steely focus.

Oren also displayed remarkable delicacy and emotional conviction while still conveying a sense of improvisational adventure on a solo reading of "Just As Though You Were Here" (a ballad recorded by Tommy Dorsey & His Orchestra with Frank Sinatra in 1942).

Jason Moran, one of the judges, applauded Oren's willingness to take risks. "When he first started his intro on his first tune, you could hear that he was actually going to try something new but wasn't sure if it was going to work out. But his ideas seemed to keep working out," Moran said. "You could hear him on the edge. He just kept taking these unexpected turns. At some point, I just closed my book and said, 'Here's a kid who is really trying to reach within the music right now.'"

The other judges were Renee Rosnes, Joanne Brackeen, Danilo Pérez, Monty Alexander, Cyrus Chestnut and Monk Institute Chairman Herbie Hancock.

Isaiah Thompson of West Orange, New Jersey, won the \$15,000 second-place scholarship prize. He performed two superb originals, "A Prayer/Good Intentions" and "The Other Originals." The first one initially sounded like a modern jazz interpretation of gospel tune from the African American church tradition before it evolved into a ragtime-like excursion. The rhythmic engine of the latter song bounced between funky backbeats and driving hard-bop swing, as Thompson embroidered the framework with impressive improvisations.

Maxime Sanchez of Toulouse, France, won the \$10,000 third-place scholarship. His performance was the most unusual of the three. He opened with a solo makeover of Ornette Coleman's "Mothers Of The Veil," on which he approached the melody in an apprehensive fashion before developing a fissured improvisation, marked by quaking tremolos, jolting harmonic dissonance, clipped melodic busts and surprising turnaround phrases. He followed with a medium-tempo take of Max Steiner's "Tara's Theme" (from his score to 1939's *Gone With The Wind*), which exuded a Monk-like playfulness.

After the finalists' performances but before the announcement of the winners, the program included a heartfelt tribute to the late Aretha Franklin. The Queen of Soul had a relationship with the Monk Institute that lasted two decades. Franklin performed at several of the competitions; she was the 2011 recipient of the Maria Fisher Founder's Award; and in 2016, she gave a moving rendition of "A Song For You" at the White House during the fifth annual International Jazz Day. Franklin was an enthusiastic supporter of the Monk Institute's jazz education initiatives, and she provided scholarship funding.

At the Eisenhower Theater, singers Lisa Henry, Jazzmeia Horn, Roberta Gambarini and Ledesi were accompanied a sterling jazz ensemble, under the direction of John Beasley. The group included many former Monk competition winners, such as pianist Kris Bowers, tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana, trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and drummer/vocalist Jamison Ross. The singers rotated lead vocal duties on a medley of some of Franklin's cherished hits: "The House That Jack Built," "Chain Of Fools," "Baby, I Love You," "I Say A Little Prayer" and "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman."

Dee Dee Bridgewater—who sang "Skylark" at Franklin's funeral—received this year's Maria Fisher Founder's Award. Bridgewater, another major ally to the Monk Institute, gave a touching acceptance speech. She reminisced about yearning to become a singer while growing up in Flint, Michigan, listening to a wide variety of music on the radio, and eventually discovering the iconic soul radio station WDIA, in Memphis, where she was born. She also shared her joy watching and mentoring so many musicians who have studied at the Monk Institute.

Horn and Ross gave a rousing duet performance of the Billie Holiday tune "Lover Man" in tribute to Bridgewater. Ledesi belted out a barrelhouse rendition of the Otis Redding hit "Try a Little Tenderness," which is featured on Bridgewater's latest album, *Memphis ... Yes, I'm Ready* (Sony). Gospel singer and actress Deborah Joy Winans sang a shining version of "If You Believe" from the 1975 Broadway play, *The Wiz*, in which Bridgewater portrayed the character Glinda.

In turn, Bridgewater delivered an exhilarating version of "Afro Blue," which featured stunning solo work from Akinmusire. Highlights also included veteran tenor saxophonist Jimmy Heath's duet with Gambarini on his composition "Without Song."

This year's competition marked the end of a three-decade long chapter for the Monk Institute. Last month, it announced that beginning in 2019, it will be renamed [the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz](#). The name change involved a request from representatives of the Monk Estate regarding the continued use of Thelonious Monk's name.

When asked if the change will affect any of the institute's educational and advocacy efforts or the competition, longtime president Tom Carter said: "We are keeping all the programs that we currently have. But there will be some expansion with us moving in directions that will very much be addressing the present and future. Herbie has always been—as Thelonious Monk [was] in his time—a groundbreaking force in the music. So, I think you will see Herbie's vision building on top of what we've done in the past." **DB**