



Tom Oren performed during the 2018 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition in Washington, DC. (Photo: Paul Morigi / Getty Images)

by **Benjamin Cohen**

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Tom Oren has tickled the ivories in relative obscurity up until this point in his career, but that's all about to change. The 24-year-old Oren, a native of **Tel Aviv**, just received the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition – one of jazz's highest honors.

The award was announced earlier this week at a gala event held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and hosted by actor Blair Underwood. Oren performed two songs at the event, including the Cole Porter standard “Just One Of Those Things.”

Oren will receive \$25,000, a recording contract and instant recognition amongst his peers. The competition is internationally recognized as a significant event for launching the careers of young aspiring jazz artists. Second place went to Isaiah Thompson of West Orange, N.J. and third place went to Maxime Sanchez of Toulouse, France.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouDn_OQr64Y

Although he was not that well known prior to this week's festivities, the young Oren is somewhat of a musical prodigy. He graduated from the prestigious Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts, reminiscent of the school that trained up-and-coming artists in the popular TV series "Fame." At the school, he led a 10-member jazz ensemble that was invited to perform across the globe.

He graduated with honors from the Israeli Conservatory of Music and studied for two years at the Rimon School of Jazz and Contemporary Music. Oren then moved to the U.S. in 2012 to attend Boston's Berklee College of Music, where he received a scholarship for four years of study.

He is also a touring member of a quartet led by a fellow Israeli, jazz saxophonist Eli Degibri. You can watch them perform at a jazz festival in Bremen, Germany, in the video below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkf832hf97o>

Israel has a strong history of producing quality jazz musicians. Anat Cohen, who plays everything from Dixieland to Brazilian choro on her clarinet, has been nominated for multiple Grammy Awards. Ester Rada, who musically merges her Ethiopian and Israeli roots, has performed at the Glastonbury Festival and has opened for Alicia Keys. Avishai Cohen, who came in third place in 1997's Thelonious Monk competition, has brought a modern twist and eclectic edge to jazz music. And Hagar Ben-Ari, the bassist for James Corden's house band on "The Late Late Show," got her start in jazz music.

Oren himself has studied under a handful of Israeli jazz piano teachers including Amit Golan, Omri Mor, Ronen Shmueli, Gilad Ronen and Mordy Ferber.

Proceeds from the all-star gala concert, which featured a special tribute to Aretha Franklin, will support the institute's public school education programs throughout the U.S. The institute also spends a considerable amount of time putting together the annual International Jazz Day celebration.

<https://www.facebook.com/monkinstitute/photos/rpp.149627448399099/2387527837942371/?type=3&theater>

Oren's prize marks the final time that the award is going to be named for Thelonious Monk, the seminal 20th century American jazz musician. Beginning next year, at the request of the Monk family, both the institute and the prize will be named after Herbie Hancock, the 78-year-old Chicago jazz legend.

"It is wonderful that the institute chose to name the organization and its UCLA-affiliated program to honor Herbie Hancock," said Judith Smith, dean of the school of music, which houses the jazz performance institute. "Herbie is a longtime supporter of jazz at UCLA, and he has a history of nurturing and launching the careers of emerging jazz artists."

Hancock was on hand at the event earlier this week. And one musician he's certain to mentor? Tom Oren.