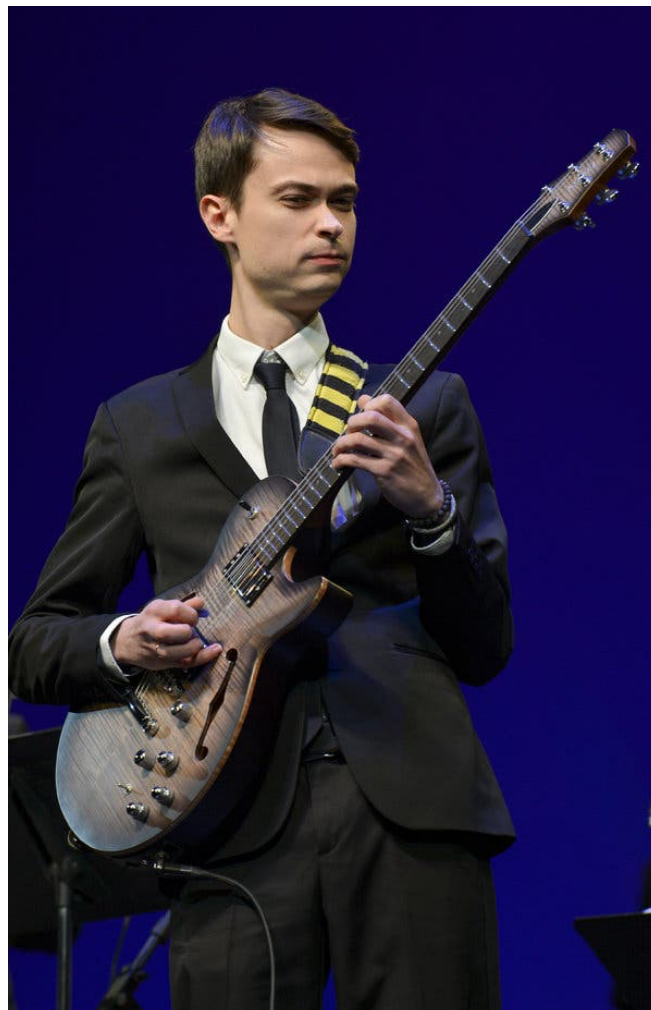


Russian Guitarist Wins Herbie Hancock Jazz Competition

Evgeny Pobozhiy, 30, took home a \$30,000 prize and a guaranteed contract with Concord Records — along with earning jazz’s highest honor for a rising musician.

By **Giovanni Russonello**

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Evgeny Pobozhiy, performing at the 2019 Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz competition at the Kennedy Center on Tuesday. Credit: Getty Images for Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz

What was long the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition has a new name and, as of Tuesday night, a winner.

The institute that runs the competition changed its name this year to the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz, citing differences with the Thelonious Monk estate. So when the Russian guitarist Evgeny Pobozhiy, 30, took home first place on Tuesday at the Kennedy Center in Washington, he became the first winner of the Herbie Hancock International Jazz Competition.

“We were so pleased that this year’s 12 guitar semifinalists represented seven countries, making it a truly international competition,” Thomas Carter, the president of the institute, said in a statement. “Jazz is flourishing around the world and this new generation of jazz guitarists represents the future of the music.”

On his way to winning the most influential prize for a rising jazz musician, Mr. Pobozhiy covered two songs from the back pages of jazz’s standard songbook: Jimmy Rowles’s “502 Blues” and Steve Swallow’s “Falling Grace.” He was accompanied by a house combo of Reggie Thomas on piano, Yasushi Nakamura on bass, Carl Allen on drums and Bobby Watson on saxophone.

He and the other finalists — Max Light of Bethesda, Md., who placed second, and Cecil Alexander of Muskegon, Mich., who came in third — advanced after strong performances in Monday’s semifinals, held at the National Museum of the American Indian.

The competition’s judges were among the leading jazz guitarists of the past 40 years: Stanley Jordan, Lionel Loueke, Russell Malone, Pat Metheny, Chico Pinheiro, Lee Ritenour and John Scofield.

The competition — which has not become materially different under the new name — has been held 30 times since it started in 1987. It focuses on a different instrument every year. Mr. Pobozhiy, who hails from the Siberian city of Seversk, was the 10th foreign-born winner. He will receive a \$30,000 academic scholarship and a guaranteed recording contract with Concord Records. All told, \$150,000 in scholarships were distributed to the various contestants.

The finals competition doubles as an all-star gala concert, and is often attended by Washington luminaries. The honoree at this year’s event was [the trumpeter Terence Blanchard](#), the longtime director of the Hancock Institute’s postgraduate music program. He accepted the Maria Fisher Founder’s Award from [Mr. Hancock](#), then performed an original tune joined by seven of his former institute students.