

Music

# The Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition Has a Winner

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Tom Oren during the finals of the Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition, Dec. 3, 2018. *Steve Munding*

Tom Oren, a 24-year-old pianist from Tel Aviv, Israel, has won the 2018 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition.

He was awarded first prize at a gala concert on Monday night, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Along with his prestigious honor, Oren will receive \$25,000 in scholarship funds and a recording contract with the Concord Music Group.



Maxim Sanchez, Isaiah Thompson and Tom Oren, with Herbie Hancock, at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Competition, Dec. 3, 2018. *Steve Munding*

Second prize went to Isaiah Thompson of West Orange, N.J. Third prize went to Maxime Sanchez of Toulouse, France. They emerged from a field of 13 semifinalists, who competed on Sunday in the Baird Auditorium at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

Oren received a wealth of training as a musician in Israel – at the Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts, as well as the Israeli Conservatory of Music and the Rimon School of Jazz and Contemporary Music. During his military service, he played in the Israeli Air Force band. He then attended the Berklee College of Music in Boston for four years, beginning in 2012.

For the last two years he has been a member of the Eli Degibri Quartet, whose leader is an Israeli saxophonist with ties to both Berklee and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Here is footage of Degibri's quartet recording "Dear Hank," from the self-released new album *Soul Station, A Tribute to Hank Mobley*. (Oren's piano solo begins just before the one-minute mark.)

Oren and his fellow finalists performed on a gala concert that also included an all-star tribute to Aretha Franklin and the presentation of the Maria Fisher Founder's Award to singer Dee Dee Bridgewater. The competition was judged by an imposing assemblage of jazz piano talent: Joanne Brackeen, Monty Alexander, Cyrus Chestnut, Renee Rosnes,

Danilo Pérez, Jason Moran and Herbie Hancock, the longtime board chairman of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz.

This was the 30th edition of the Monk Competition, and the last under that name; in 2019, the Monk Institute [will become the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz](#).

For all of his accolades in Israel, Oren has not become a household name for jazz fans in the United States. The competition could change that, to a degree. Its past winners have included some of the most consequential new arrivals in jazz. Some of them – vocalist Jazzmeia Horn, tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana, trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, pianist Kris Bowers and drummer Jamison Ross – performed on the gala concert.

Oren's contribution to the concert included a Cole Porter standard, "Just One Of Those Things," and a much lesser-known entry from the American songbook, "<https://youtu.be/VIET-XmqwtY>">Just As Though You Were Here." Like his fellow finalists, he performed with a veteran house rhythm team of bassist Rodney Whitaker and drummer Carl Allen, and was judged by a combination of criteria, including technical proficiency, melodic acuity and the ability to communicate with an audience.