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New Voices From Jazz's Emerging Generation

By PETER WATROUS

WASHINGTON, Oct. 25 — By the end of Thursday afternoon, jazz, its body spread out on the floor of the practice room of the Eisenhower Theater at the Kennedy Center here, had come close to death. The 11th annual competition of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, this year featuring the trumpet, had just finished its semifinals, and the consensus in the room was that the 15 young trumpeters taking part had collectively fallen off the stage, bumping their foreheads on the potted plants.

They fumbled and choked, and the five who made it to the finals — Darren Barrett, Diego Urcola, Avishai Cohen, John Sneider and Matt Shulman — had a task ahead of them. And as a measure of the power of the Monk Institute's competition, which in theory rounds up the best young talent around the world, the semifinals were seen as a

metaphor for the future of jazz itself. It didn't look good, especially since the institute had made a special effort to raise the level of the competitors this year by inviting some of the better-known musicians who fit the competition's criteria.

But things change, and the corpse revived itself, as the corpse of jazz always does. At the finals on Friday in Baird Auditorium of the Natural History Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, the five trumpeters played at an extraordinarily high level. In front of a large audience and the trumpet-playing judges — Clark Terry, Art Farmer, Arturo Sandoval, Wallace Roney, Randy Brecker and Jon Faddis — all five played with technical ability, confidence, imagination and distinction. There were five individual voices, supported by an exceptional rhythm section of Eric Reed on piano, Rodney Whitaker on bass and Brian Blade on drums.

Mr. Faddis, a musician with exceptional ears who can be a scathing critic, remarked that his own generation of players didn't come close to having that many good musicians.

"This crop of trumpeters in the competition was working at a very, very, very high level," Mr. Faddis said afterward. "And each one of them had their own style, their own sound."

Darren Barrett won with a display of bravado that perhaps wasn't backed by perfect technical ability. But of the five finalists, he was the only one to venture out of the be-bop idiom; he had a trumpeter's soul, loud and aggressive and full of energy. He played, and probably won, by turning in a version of "Sweet Lorraine," performed

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Amy Thompson for The New York Times
Darren Barrett, winner of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz competition.

with a straight mute, in a swing style. By the time Mr. Barrett got going, with blues phrases and shouts and riffs, the audience, not in the least bit cynical, and looking for a bit of showmanship, was hollering.

"I've been lucky," said Mr. Barrett, 30, of Boston, who has a sense of humor. "I think it was Ron Carter who told me to learn the history of the horn, learn the history of the horn. So when I played 'Sweet Lorraine,' I was thinking about Louis Armstrong. Not because I wanted to imitate him — there's no point in doing that — but because I wanted something of his energy. Look, we're entertainers."

Mr. Faddis said he thought his performance of the tune had joy and fear, pain and happiness, and finally, excitement.

Diego Urcola, an Argentine living in Manhattan, came in second, and among the judges there was a feeling that he and Mr. Barrett could have easily switched places. While Mr. Barrett was extroverted, Mr. Urcola impressed the audience with a tango by Carlos Gardel called "El Dia Que Me Queres," played as a ballad. Mr. Urcola, a main soloist in one of New York's best big ensembles, the Guillermo Klein big band, has also spent time in Jimmy Heath's big band, the United Nations Orchestra and Slide Hampton's Jazz Masters. On the ballad, using a mute as well, he made every note sound perfectly placed; his solo had all the rhetorical tools of deep passion.

Then he came out swinging on a blues number of his called "Super Mario," with clear, articulated lines that coursed through the rhythm section.

"I've known Diego for along time," said

the trumpeter Michael Leonhart, a semi-finalist who, in the opinion of several people at the contest, should have made it into the finals. "He doesn't have a radical style, but he's a great musician. He makes you listen to what he's playing. You can follow what he does."

Jimmy Heath, the great saxophonist and teacher, was in the audience. Both Mr. Urcola and Mr. Barrett have been his students. Mr. Heath was beaming. "These are my boys," he said. "When I was their age, I wasn't playing nearly as much as they are."

The third-place winner, Avishai Cohen, from Israel by way of Berklee College of Music in Boston, took a totally different approach, arranging his three songs so that the end of the second, "Infant Eyes," by Wayne Shorter, led into "One Finger Snap," by Herbie Hancock, who as the master of ceremonies for the contest noted that Mr.

Cohen had a good taste in tunes.

Mr. Cohen played gently, letting his tendency to run out of power rule his intimate approach. It was careful improvising, and he moved notes around with his eyes open; he was thinking, and putting his notes in places where they had the most effect. He occasionally even pushed the harmony, dropping vinegar notes, or geometric figures, against the regularity of a tune.

Neal Abercrombie, an ex-trumpeter who is now now a Congressman from Hawaii, was in the audience for the finals. He was thrilled.

"Jazz is the most important and vivid manifestation of American artistic culture, the culmination of so much work," he said. "There were five trumpeters, all playing instruments approximately the same size and shape. The physics of it are all identical. But art, the human dimension, changes ev-

erything, and we heard five different players trying to extend a tradition, trying to be different but respectful. It's really an extraordinary experience to be around a flowering like this."

At the Watergate Hotel for the after-finals party, Mr. Faddis was joking with Mr. Barrett.

"Yeah, I saw Wallace Roney," Mr. Faddis said. "He was sitting next to me, and he was falling asleep."

"While I was playing?" asked Mr. Barrett, a look of sadness crossing his face.

"Um, his eyes were open," Mr. Faddis said, "but I think I could hear him snoring."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Barrett, putting his hands over his face in resignation.

Mr. Faddis laughed, letting him know that it might not be true, but that Mr. Barrett had certainly been had. The two went off to the party. Jazz lived on.