

Cecile McLorin Salvant: 2010 Thelonious Monk Competition Winner

By Michael J. West
October 5, 2010

Two things to remember:

- (1) Singing is perhaps the most subjectively appreciated aspect of music (perhaps the most subjectively appreciated art).
- (2) Singers hear things in other singers that you and I don't.

That's certainly the reasoning this writer fell back on, having guessed (and had that guess reaffirmed by an informal survey of acquaintances in the audience) that Brooklyn's **Charenee Wade** would win the 2010 Thelonious Monk International Vocal Competition, with her firm control and the subtle maturity of her delivery. It was a surprise indeed when the winner was **Cecile McLorin Salvant**, 21, a French-Haitian-American from Miami — who will now reap the benefits of a \$20,000 scholarship and a recording contract with Concord Music Group.



Plus the small additional prize of singing “Blue Skies” onstage at the Kennedy Center’s Eisenhower Theater alongside judges **Dianne Reeves**, **Patti Austin**, **Al Jarreau**, **Kurt Elling**, and **Dee Dee Bridgewater**, plus special guests **Jane Monheit**, **Ledisi**, and **Gladys Knight**.

Wade received second place honors (a scholarship worth \$10,000), with French vocalist **Cyrille Amie** (\$5,000) taking third.

The competition began Sunday with the semifinals, held at the National Museum of the American Indian’s Rasmuson Theater. Twelve international vocalists were required to play a program of three tunes each (one by Thelonious Monk, the founder of our feast), with the backing of pianist **Reggie Thomas***, bassist **Rodney Whittaker**, and drummer **Carl Allen**. There were no local semifinalists this year (unlike 2009, when both eventual winner **Ben Williams** and semifinalist **Corcoran Holt** were DC natives). Tonight’s finals called for each of the three finalists to sing an additional two songs.



Page Two

Notably, announced judge and gala performer **Aretha Franklin** was absent after her son sustained critical injuries in an [assault](#) last month. The judges' panel made do without her, while the audience had to settle for an appearance by **Gladys Knight** (darn).

To these ears, McLorin was extremely gifted and technically skilled, and easily the best scatter of the bunch. On the other hand, she had an edge in her voice of melodrama and a little bit of an overreliance on **Billie Holiday**'s vocal mannerisms. I thought she'd make an excellent second-place winner. Of course, these ears aren't qualified to stand in for Elling's, Reeves', Bridgewater's, Jarreau's, and/or Austin's.

But if Aretha was here, she'd have agreed with me.

*The five of you who followed my live tweets of the semifinals on Sunday may have noticed that I credited piano to **Geoffrey Keezer**, last year's pianist. My bad.

(Update 10/5 7:32 AM: It bears mentioning that I missed the first hour of Sunday's semifinal, which included Salvant's performance for that day. My critique of her singing would surely have been affected if I'd seen her perform twice, as I did Wade and Amie. *Caveat emptor.*)