

Melissa Aldana Wins Thelonious Monk Competition For Saxophonists

From NPR Jazz

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At a ceremony and concert last night in Washington, D.C., the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz named Melissa Aldana, 24, the winner of its annual competition for young musicians. The highest-profile event of its kind, this year's competition was open to saxophonists.

Aldana, who plays tenor sax, is the first female instrumentalist to take first prize in the [event's history](#), held every year since 1987. She wins \$25,000 in scholarship money and a recording contract with Concord Music Group. Fellow tenor player Tivon Pennicott, 27, won second prize and a \$15,000 scholarship; alto saxophonist Godwin Louis, 28, finished third and took home \$10,000 in scholarship funds. All three finalists are currently based in New York City.

"I'm really good friends with Godwin and Tivon," Aldana said following the competition. "They are like my brothers, so I was really honored to be next to them."

In the final round, she performed a medium-slow take on the standard "I Thought About You," showcasing her dark tone, motivic development and creative ornamentation; she also called an original



Melissa Aldana performs at the 2013 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition at The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

composition in the uptempo, angular "[Free Fall](#)." Like all the contestants, she was accompanied by the trio of Reggie Thomas (piano), Rodney Whitaker (bass) and Carl Allen (drums). Judging was handled by a panel of saxophonists: Wayne Shorter, Jimmy Heath, Bobby Watson, Branford Marsalis and Jane Ira Bloom. Before announcing the winners, the Monk Institute also presented a series of tribute performances to Shorter, who turned 80 this year, and the late keyboardist George Duke, the previous musical director for the ceremonial concert associated with the Monk Competition.

Raised in Chile, Aldana came to the U.S. in 2006 to study at Berklee College of Music. Her father and grandfather were also saxophonists; in fact, her father Marcos Aldana competed in the 1991 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition.

"He said it was really terrible, actually," Aldana said. "He said it was, like, 23 people. He was really scared. It was the year Chris Potter and Joshua Redman were here. But he was like, 'Just be yourself and play, and you'll be fine.'"

Aldana has at least one "shovel-ready" recording project prepared: She is planning to document her Crash Trio with drummer Francisco Mela and bassist Pablo Menares. Previously, Aldana released two albums on the Inner Circle label — founded by saxophonist Greg Osby, who has also employed her with his own band.

She's also looking forward to using the scholarship funds: "I'm going to take a lot of great lessons with people," she said.



Paul

Melissa Aldana congratulates fellow 2013 Monk Competition finalists and friends Godwin Louis (left) and Tivon Pennicott.

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