

Melissa Aldana Wins 2013 Thelonious Monk Competition

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Jazz history was made at the Kennedy Center Monday night. In the 27-year history of jazz's most prestigious international competition, a woman has never won in the instrumental categories. (Conversely, *only* women have won the vocal competitions, raising discomfiting questions about women's "place" in the music.) That precedent was shattered in this year's Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition, when **Melissa Aldana**, a 24-year-old tenor saxophonist from Santiago, Chile, won the grand prize of a \$25,000 scholarship and record contract with Concord Music Group.

Better yet, she got to take a victory lap in a blowing session with fellow saxophonists (and judges) **Jimmy Heath**, **Bobby Watson**, **Jane Ira Bloom**, **Branford Marsalis**, and **Wayne Shorter**, plus a kaleidoscope of other musicians, on Heath's classic "Gingerbread Boy."

Aldana, who graduated from Boston's Berklee Conservatory and has lived in New York since 2009, is a legacy. Her father, Chilean saxophonist **Marco Aldana**, was a semifinalist in the 1991 Thelonious Monk Competition.

She took first place on the strength of her two performances: the 1930s standard "I Thought About You"—which she played in a bluesy, noirish mode—and the self-composed title track to her 2010 debut recording, *Free Fall*. Aldana played both tunes with considerable subtlety and a soft touch on the keys, but also with careful attention to detail and, most distinctively, descending slurs that served as a musical signature.

Aldana had shown these same hallmarks in Sunday's semifinals, from which she emerged as one of three finalists (out of 13 semifinalists). She was not, however, the front-runner going into Monday night. **Godwin Louis**, an altoist and Harlem native (and fellow Berklee alum), wowed the semifinals' audience with his brash style. He combined a high-register, breathy tone with coarse accents and harmonic playfulness. He was the clear audience favorite on Sunday, including most of the musicians and critics to whom I spoke. Louis came into the competition with a unique, fully formed concept on the instrument that was comparable to that of trumpeter **Ambrose Akinmusire** when he won the 2007 Competition.

But Louis faltered. Though he did great work on his first tune, "Skylark," on his second (the original "Our Father") he got lost in his own groove and his energetic improvisation sputtered out anticlimactically. I thought Louis might pull out a victory anyway, simply because he was so distinctive and original, but clearly the damage was done. Louis placed third.

The other finalist, tenor player **Tivon Pennicott** of Marietta, Ga. (currently a member of **Esperanza Spalding's** touring band), had a smooth, softer sound not dissimilar from Aldana's, but with more explicit blues power lurking beneath. He presented a fairly good case on **Sonny Rollins'** "Strode Rode," though he made two choices in his solo that were immediately questionable. First, he relied heavily on the flurried licks and overblowing that **John Coltrane** pioneered and that the entire saxophone world assimilated. Second, and probably more glaring, he left no space for the other band members (Thomas, bassist **Rodney Whitaker**, and drummer **Carl Allen**) to solo, though he and Allen did have an impressive round of traded four-bar phrases. Pennicott's version of "Smile" was better; Pennicott clearly knew the tune inside out, and gave it a knowing, ruminative solo treatment along with a subtly virtuosic coda.

Personally, I went zero for three on predictions; I was cautiously expecting Louis to win, followed by Aldana and Pennicott. (I had also predicted D.C.'s contestant, [altoist Braxton Cook](#), to be in the finals after a strong performance, though he didn't make it past the Sunday semifinals.) But I was likely not alone on such a precedent-shattering night for jazz. Melissa Aldana's victory opens a long-closed door for female instrumentalists.