

Winner Picked in 29th Thelonious Monk Competition

Israeli pianist Tom Oren grabs top honors in final contest before Monk Institute name change

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Tom Oren, winner of the 2018 Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition (photo: Steve Mundinger/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz)

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2018 was a remarkable year for the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, held Dec. 2-3 in Washington, D.C. It marked the return of jazz's most prestigious contest after a two-year hiatus, and a delayed 30th-anniversary celebration for the event, which began in 1987. It was also the last iteration that will bear the name of Thelonious Monk; its organizer, the Thelonious Monk Institute, will rename itself after pianist Herbie Hancock (its current chairman) on Jan. 1, 2019. And for the first time, an Israeli musician—pianist Tom Oren—walked away with the top prize of a \$25,000 scholarship and a contract with Concord Records.

Oren, a native of Tel Aviv, was one of three contestants to reach the Dec. 3 finals round at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, alongside second-place winner Isaiah Thompson (from West Orange, N.J.) and third-place winner Maxime Sanchez (from Toulouse, France). The finalists performed with bassist Rodney Whitaker and drummer Carl Allen, the competition's house accompanists, flexing their chops before a panel of judges that included Hancock, Monty Alexander, Joanne Brackeen, Cyrus Chestnut, Jason Moran, Danilo Pérez, and Renee Rosnes.

Each finalist performed two pieces on the piano: one with Allen and Whitaker, and the other unaccompanied. Sanchez began the round, performing "Mothers of the Veil" solo and "Gone with the Wind" with trio. In both instances, he gave the tunes a blocky rhythm and jarring chords, reminiscent of the competition's for-now namesake. Thompson followed, submitting a ragtime "Good Intentions" for his solo piece and a swinging version of his own "The Other Upstairs" that had rhythm to spare and a fresh approach to soloing.

Oren's prize-winning performance included two pieces associated with Frank Sinatra: "Just One of Those Things" and "Just as Though You Were Here." The former, done with Whitaker and Allen, was easily the flashiest number of the evening, swinging hard and showing in its Bud Powell-like flourishes both knowledge of jazz piano history and the seeds of originality. "Just as Though You Were Here" was Oren's solo performance, the only ballad of the finals, imbued with both sensitivity and a surprisingly heavy touch.

"Oh, man," said the evening's host, actor Blair Underwood, when the finalists had finished. "That's a whole lot of talent onstage."

It was a surprising selection of performers, pared down from a slate of 13 in the semifinals. Among these were pianists from (among others) Spain, Hungary, and Armenia, as well as the United States. Some are already beginning to garner some attention in the jazz world, including Kansas native Addison Frei and Estonian Holger Marjamaa. The most surprising omission may have been Chicago pianist Michael King, whose work in the semifinals was

well-received to the point of a rare standing ovation—not a Monk finalist, but a talent to watch.

The gala surrounding the competition finals also included a tribute to singer Aretha Franklin, a longtime supporter of the Monk Institute; R&B singer Ledisi joined jazz vocalists (and former Monk Competition contestants) Roberta Gambarini, Lisa Henry, and Jazzmeia Horn to perform a medley of Franklin favorites that began with “The House That Jack Built” and ended with “Respect.” (Their accompanists were also Monk Competition alumni: trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, saxophonist Melissa Aldana, pianist Kris Bowers, bassist Linda Oh, and drummer Jamison Ross.) When it concluded, Hancock took the stage to announce the creation of the Aretha Franklin Young Artist Award, which the Monk Institute will debut in 2019.

Dee Dee Bridgewater, another longtime supporter and gala participant, received the evening’s Maria Fisher Founder’s Award, after which she performed her West African-influenced arrangement of Mongo Santamaria’s “Afro Blue.” Following the announcement of Oren’s win, all of the previous performers joined the pianist onstage in his victory lap: a marathon performance of Miles Davis’ “Walkin’.”

“Wow,” said Hancock, correctly, “this is really a memorable evening.”

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