

Evgeny Pobozhiy Wins Hancock International Jazz Guitar Competition

The 30-year-old Russian dazzles a panel of first-rank players in Washington; Americans Max Light and Cecil Alexander take second and third place

by Michael J. West
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Photo: Jati Lindsay

Left to right: Max Light, Cecil Alexander, and Evgeny Pobozhiy backstage at the 2019 Herbie Hancock International Jazz Guitar Competition in Washington, D.C.

“Our heartfelt congratulations to ... Ev? Eg? Again-y? They never told me how to pronounce it,” Herbie Hancock admitted, to the amusement of everyone watching—including the guitarist whose name he was mangling. “Now I’d like to invite our first-place winner.” At that point, as the audience laughed, 30-year-old guitarist Evgeny Pobozhiy quietly whispered the correct pronunciation to the legendary jazz pianist and chair of the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz, whose annual international competition Pobozhiy had just won.

A native of western Siberia currently based in Moscow, Russia, Pobozhiy overcame a remarkably tough contest to take top honors in the 2019 Herbie Hancock International Jazz Competition—its first Russian champion. Marking its inaugural year under the Hancock name, the competition held its final round on December 3 at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The event also served as an all-star gala concert. In its finale, Pobozhiy joined with the accomplished lineup of guitarists who had served as the competition’s judges in a high-octane rendition of Wes Montgomery’s “Four on Six.”

His prize for winning the world’s most prestigious jazz contest (known as the [Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition](#) from its inception in 1987 until 2018) includes a \$30,000 scholarship and a guaranteed recording contract with Concord Music Group. His fellow finalists, Max Light (of Bethesda, Maryland) and Cecil Alexander (of Muskegon, Michigan), finished second and third, respectively.

The judging panel was a Murderer’s Row of modern jazz guitar masters, including Stanley Jordan, Lionel Loueke, Russell Malone, Pat Metheny, Chico Pinheiro, Lee Ritenour, and John Scofield.

2019 was only the third time in the competition’s 32-year history that it focused on guitarists. (Each year, a different instrument takes the spotlight.) However, that neither heightened nor lowered expectations, since the competition’s standards are already sky-high; its gallery of past winners is a who’s-who of musicians who went on to become jazz

stars. It was also clear very quickly that all three of the finalists were up to those standards.

Light, who was the first to play the required two tunes per person, had a hushed, mellow tone and ginger touch—so much so that at first his playing got lost behind the competition's house band (pianist Reggie Thomas, bassist Yasushi Nakamura, drummer Carl Allen, and alto saxophonist Bobby Watson, who joined each contestant for one song). When it did come through in his solo on Victor Lewis' "Hey, It's Me You're Talking To," it had a stunning fluidity that carried over to his second song, Ellington's "Prelude to a Kiss." The perfection of his tone and articulation were clearly Light's strengths, and he emphasized them at every turn.

Alexander's core traits were less related to tone and more about blues feel and, especially, inventive technique. His finger work was unbelievably quick and lithe. As he worked out on "One Finger Snap," his thumb perched precariously at the top of the neck, threatening at any moment to swoop in over the bass strings—but only did so once. Following up with Wayne Shorter's "Infant Eyes," Alexander varied his tone and attack, at one point even replicating Jordan's "touch" technique.

It wasn't immediately apparent what Poboziy brought to the party, except that in his solo intro he used some of Metheny's language and Bill Frisell's approach to resonance—the latter continuing into "502 Blues," his first song. But the nod to Frisell was passing; Poboziy ultimately built up to a pyrotechnic display of physical dexterity, a unique harmonic formula, touches of rock distortion and riffage, and tone that went from silken to corrosive and back again. It brought the house down. Watson joined him for a swinging, faintly samba-touched arrangement of Steve Swallow's "Falling Grace." First accompanying Watson, he was unobtrusive but not a wallflower either; his own solo was nimble and fleet, with subtleties that suggested a full range of possibilities.

"This is going to be a really tough call," I whispered to a friend after they finished, "but I think the Russian kid has it." Indeed he did.

While we waited to find this out, however, the audience observed what was, true to its word, an all-star concert. Unfortunately, it was also a concert whose programming was completely incoherent.

It had been advertised as featuring a tribute to Terence Blanchard; between that and the guitar competition, one might have expected stress on one or both of those themes. Instead, singers took pride of place. Dee Dee Bridgewater, the competition's mistress of ceremonies, came out to sing "What a Wonderful World" with flugelhornist Diego Urcola and pianist John Beasley (the evening's musical director). Then came Jane Monheit to perform "Chega de Saudade," which turned out to be an oddly selected intro for actor Keith David, who performed an excerpt from his stage show *Celebrating Joe Williams' Centennial*.

The Blanchard tribute, too, was vocal-heavy, with Lizz Wright and Cassandra Wilson reprising standards they had performed on Blanchard albums. (Both were great performances, but odd choices with tenuous connections.) There were also instrumental performances by former students and protégés of the trumpeter/composer, though it felt like filler until Blanchard came out (after a long introduction by former New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu) to join them on his own "Soldier." The competition was the main course, obviously—but the side dishes still could have been better.