

Israeli Pianist Wins Thelonious Monk Contest



Tom Oren, 24, of Tel Aviv. With his finish at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz's gala, he will receive a \$25,000 prize and a recording contract with the Concord Music Group. Credit...Steve Munding/Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz

By Giovanni Russonello
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Jazz's most influential showcase of rising talent, the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, returned on Monday from a hiatus, crowning the 24-year-old Israeli pianist Tom Oren as this year's winner.

Mr. Oren's first-place finish — part of the [Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz's](#) gala at the Kennedy Center in Washington — includes a \$25,000 prize and a recording contract with the Concord Music Group.

He bested two other finalists, Isaiah Thompson of West Orange, N.J., who took second place, and Maxime Sanchez of Toulouse, France. They had been selected from a field of 13 semifinalists during a qualifying round on Sunday.

This week's contest represented its 29th and final edition using Thelonious Monk's name. Starting next year, the organization will become the Herbie Hancock Institute; the competition, which it runs, will take Mr. Hancock's name as well. (He is the institute's chairman.)

"The Monk family requested that they would like to use the name in other directions, and we decided that we would abide by their wishes," Thomas R. Carter, the institute's president, said in an interview. "All the programs that are currently in place will continue."

The drummer T.S. Monk, the son of the institute's famed namesake, did not respond to an email requesting comment. He has been a ubiquitous presence at Monk competitions, but did not attend this year's event.

The Monk institute started the competition in 1987, and for its first three years it focused on rising pianists. Starting in 1990, it began to highlight a different instrument each year; it has since helped to [catapult the careers](#) of prominent young vocalists, saxophonists, trumpeters, drummers and more.

The institute had not held a gala [since 2015](#). Mr. Carter attributed this to the institute's recent focus on International Jazz Day, an initiative it began in 2011, and the difficulty of arts fund-raising at a time [when natural disasters](#) have put an added burden on humanitarian philanthropy.

Mr. Oren, a native of Tel Aviv, is very much a product of jazz's educational establishment. He attended the Thelma Yellin High School of the Arts in Givatayim, Israel, and the Israel Conservatory of Music in Tel Aviv, as well as the Rimon School of Jazz and Contemporary Music in Ramat HaSharon and the Arison Campus of the Arts in Tel Aviv. He came to the United States in 2012 to [attend Berklee College of Music in Boston](#) on a four-year scholarship.