

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

At Monk Competition, a Sound Worth Returning To



Kris Bowers, 22, won the \$25,000 first prize Monday at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz competition at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. Credit...Andrew Council for The New York Times

By Ben Ratliff
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WASHINGTON — Hod Moshonov, a 22-year-old pianist from Israel, had already loosened his tie by 1 p.m. on Sunday, and his wine-colored dress shirt was coming loose from his waist. Super-revved, he seemed to dump his whole conception of jazz on his instrument.

He leaned into the grand piano and damped the strings, playing muted percussive melodies with his right hand alone. Then some classical Romantic fantasias, leading into aggressive versions of

Thelonious Monk's "Think of One" and Freddie Hubbard's "Birdlike." He sang along to his rhapsodic improvising and beatboxed against his rhythms. It was an exhausting 10 minutes.

Mr. Moshonov was the first of 12 to compete in the [Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition](#) here on Sunday, presented by the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Despite his abundant talent, he was the first to fall. He did not make the finals. Kris Bowers, 22, from Los Angeles but now a New Yorker, played a little after the halfway point on Sunday, and the next day he won the \$25,000 first prize.

What did Mr. Bowers have that the judges wanted? Polish, understatement, breadth. He made the piano sound clear and pleasing, and he got along with the rhythm section. He played "The Summer Knows," from Michel Legrand's "Summer of '42" soundtrack, and then turned "Blue Monk" three ways: reharmonized, stride-style and as a stomping shuffle. It was the only time all afternoon that the audience started to clap and shout.

Aside from the imposing panel of judges — Herbie Hancock, Ellis Marsalis, Danilo Pérez, Renee Rosnes, and Jason Moran — Aretha Franklin was sitting in the auditorium at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. (She would be awarded the Monk Institute's Maria Fisher Founder's Award, and sing in the gala concert on Monday night at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.) She sought out Mr. Bowers backstage, got his telephone number and suggested they work together. She told him that "Summer of '42" meant a lot to her because she was born that year.

The Monk competitions are many things: thrilling, strange, boring. Musicians play unaccompanied and with a trio, with one Monk tune required. The process can become an unsolvable puzzle. It is a performance, an occasion to demonstrate presence of mind, but for each contestant it is also a canned and unnatural 10 minutes. You must be memorable, but you can't overdo it. Most people agree that jazz lives on originality, but you must prove yourself a proper custodian of the past. You want to create immediate gratification, but the implication of the first prize is that you'll be a responsible bandleader, carrying jazz forward.



Andrew Councill for The New York Times

The event — the most visible part of the institute’s educational initiative, which includes high school programs and a tuition-free master’s program at U.C.L.A. for eight students at a time — began 25 years ago, in 1986. At first it was piano-only, and soon the featured instrument began to change each year. This was the seventh piano competition; winners have included Marcus Roberts, Jacky Terrasson and Eric Lewis. Winning first prize does not guarantee fame, but it helps, especially at a time when many jazz bandleaders do their own publicity via Twitter, and a deal with Concord Records, a label with a publicity department, comes with it.

The two-year master’s program has yielded visible results. New York jazz aficionados will have noticed a clump of excellent performers who all seem to play in other people’s bands: Gerald Clayton, Joe Sanders, Ambrose Akinmusire, Walter Smith III, Chris Dingman. What they have in common is their recent involvement with the Monk Institute.

Pianists do it all: they’re leaders, composers, rhythm-section players and unaccompanied soloists. In this Monk competition some pianists created a sleek and battened-down European mood, as if auditioning for ECM Records; they weren’t so interested in the feeling of swing. Most of the solos

were built of prefabricated lines and licks, without much melodic improvisation. Few pianists accompanied a bass or drum solo; they just shut down for a little while. And some were nervously overeager to show how good they were with tricky rhythmic patterns: perhaps that's why Monk's "Evidence," with its unusual pattern of rests, like potholes in a road, was presented three times.

Emmet Cohen, a senior at the University of Miami, placed third on Monday, and one of the competition's most memorable musicians came in second. Joshua White, 26, from San Diego, had one overriding style: he embedded a song in thick, unbroken clumps of chords. He pressed hard against the rhythm section and improvised with form, telling the bassist Rodney Whitaker and the drummer Carl Allen what to do and when, accelerating and decelerating, suddenly going free. (Nobody else did that.)

Mr. White used a lot of dissonance and clutter, but it was provocative, chord-related clutter, not the brilliant-soloist kind made mostly with the right hand. It was a sound worth returning to, one that had more to do with Monk than that of the rest of the pianists — although emulating Monk per se is not a competition requirement.

Ms. Franklin was the star of Monday's 25th-anniversary gala concert, the most extreme and complicated example of an event that has historically brought together a surreal mixture of inward improvisers, outward pop stars and government officials.

Dozens of personages shuffled on and off stage. Among them were Colin L. Powell and Madeleine K. Albright, who participated on the institute's anniversary committee; executives from sponsors, including Cadillac, Northrop Grumman and United Airlines, who all gave grandiloquent speeches; former competitors, not all of them winners; Mr. Hancock and Wayne Shorter; the "American Idol" star Jennifer Hudson, who sang "Oh Me Oh My (I'm a Fool for You Baby)"; the rapper Doug E. Fresh; Chaka Khan, Dianne Reeves, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Kurt Elling and Jane Monheit, who strung together a half-dozen Franklin hits; and Ms. Franklin herself, who sang "Moody's Mood for Love," dramatically, with lots of cries and asides, dancing her way offstage, letting a stagehand untangle a long, gauzy shoulder wrap from her microphone cord.