

Lifestyle

Guitar at Forefront in Herbie Hancock Jazz Competition

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Trumpeter Terence Blanchard (center) receives the 2019 Maria Fisher Founder's Award from Herbie Hancock during the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Competition finals on Dec. 2. Also onstage is (from left) guitarist Lionel Loueke, actor Keith David, vocalist Lizz Wright, NEA jazz master Dee Dee Bridgewater, jazz vocalist Cassandra Wilson and former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu. (Shevry Lassiter/The Washington Informer)

The Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Competition, one of the most prestigious jazz competitions in the world, was held in the Rasmuson Theater at the Smithsonian Institute National Museum of the American Indian on Monday in northwest D.C. with the finals taking place in the Eisenhower Theater of the Kennedy Center the following night.

Each year the competition, formerly known as the Thelonious Monk Institute Competition, spotlights a different musical instrument. This year, a dozen guitarists competed for over \$150,00 in scholarship and prizes and the guarantee of a recording contract with Concord Music Group.

Carnival CEO Arnold Donald announced Evgeny Pobozhiy of Seversk, Russia, as the winner of the competition.

Max Light of Bethesda, Maryland, placed second in the competition and the lone African American in the competition, Cecil Alexander, 25, of Muskegon, Michigan, who trained at Berklee College of Music and majored in jazz composition and attended William Patterson University, placed third.



From left: Dee Dee Bridgewater with Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Competition finalists Max Light, Evgeny Pobozhiy and Cecil Alexander (Steve Mundinger/Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz)

Alexander's mother, Janice, watching the semifinals said her son began playing guitar when he was 8 years old and continued instruction to perfect his craft. She along with Cecil's wife, Ari, who plays piano and sings, were excited to see him compete.

The judges receive a suggested list of criteria that each musician should meet. In addition to evaluating the contestants' feeling, swing, concept, creativity and originality, the judges were encouraged to come up with their own criteria.

One judge, guitarist Stanley Jordan, said, "It is important for me to hear where the guitar is going in the future."

Michael Philips, music director for Takoma Radio, said of the final competition, "The night was long, but the music was great. I agree with Herbie that all three guitarists are on the track to greatness."

"As in most competitions like this, the flashier player with great technique [is] the winner, while those with more melodic and understated playing [don't] come out on top," Philips said. "That's just the way these competitions are."

Philips said the three finalists were solid players with plenty of style creativity and believes he would enjoy an entire concert with any one of them as the headliner.

"Since one of them is from Bethesda, I may very well get the chance," he added.

The evening could be seen as an embarrassment of riches with all of the great talent on stage. All of the performers shared the spotlight, and all had time to shine.

Standout moments came when trumpeter Terence Blanchard and guitarist Lionel Loueke were soloing or when Dee Dee Bridgewater breathed fresh life into the old standard “What A Wonderful Life.”

“I could have sat and listened to saxophonists Dayna Stephens or Walter Smith III play all night,” Philips said. “I’d never seen Liz Wright before and I loved that she sang with no affectation, just with honesty and emotion.”

Hancock presented the 2019 Maria Fisher Founder’s Award to trumpeter, composer, educator and Grammy Award winner Terence Blanchard.

Sunny Sumter, executive director of the DC JazzFest, said the event showed that the guitar is alive and well.

“It’s wonderful that there are so many young people that are studying such a brilliant instrument, and kudos to the Herbie Hancock Institute for really shining the spotlight on the guitar and having it center stage,” Sumter said. “It was thrilling to watch.”