

Arts Desk

With excitement and an elegy, Jahari Stampley wins the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition

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NEW YORK — Jahari Stampley has a swarming, kinetic interface with the piano, which can make it seem like a contraption rattling to keep pace with his stream of thought. In the last several years, that brash but tactical style has served him well on tour with the virtuoso bassist Stanley Clarke and others. On Sunday night at the new Perelman Performing Arts Center in Lower Manhattan, it won him first prize in the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition, instantly putting his insurgent talent on a broader global stage.



Jahari Stampley performing at the Perelman Performing Arts Center in New York on Oct. 15, during the Hancock Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition. Credit: Steve Mundinger For Herbie Hancock Institute Of Jazz

Stampley — born and raised in Chicago, now an undergraduate at the Manhattan School of Music — will receive \$50,000, along with the most prestigious honor reserved for a young jazz musician. Second prize (\$25,000) went to Connor Rohrer, a harmonically advanced player who originally hails from Mechanicsburg, PA. Third prize (\$10,000) went to Paul Cornish, a thoughtful and expressive Houston native now based in Los Angeles. The three finalists were selected from a pool of 11 pianists who competed in the semifinals on Saturday.

“The level of piano is so high,” Danilo Pérez, one of five distinguished pianists on the judges’ panel, said of the overall quality of the field. “The piano is in good hands, man. I got so inspired, hearing this.” Pérez spoke moments after Stampley’s win — an announcement made onstage by Herbie Hancock, chairman of the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz. He was another member of the jury, alongside Bill Charlap, Orrin Evans and Hiromi.

The Hancock Competition — formerly known as the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, prior to a name change five years ago — has been a closely watched annual rite, notwithstanding a few interruptions, since 1987. Conceived strictly as a piano competition, it branched out to include other instruments as well as vocals, in rotation. As a result of pandemic disruptions, this year marked its first edition since 2019, when the focus fell on guitar. “For us to be

back at piano, and to do it here in New York City, is a wonderful situation for the artists, and for the music, and likewise for Herbie,” remarked Tom Carter, the institute’s co-founder and president.



Herbie Hancock and finalists Jahari Stampley, Connor Rohrer and Paul Cornish at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition, Oct. 15, 2023. Steve Munding For Herbie Hancock Institute Of Jazz

into a trio, during a brisk jog through “The Intrepid Fox,” by Freddie Hubbard, and a gospel-soul treatment of “Come Sunday,” by Duke Ellington. But in both Cornish and Rohrer’s mini-sets, it was hard not to notice a lurking unease, the sense of something vital held in reserve.

Stampley didn’t have that issue. From his first zippering phrase, it was obvious he was chasing an ideal of gonzo extravagance. He opened with an original, “Prelude Entrance” (*entrance* as in “to put in a trance”), which came bathed in flamboyant technical devices, like a helping of Harlem stride and a flutter of vocal percussion. When it was time for Goods and Allen to lock into his groove, they struggled, because Stampley left them in the dust; from his seat at the piano, he made it unclear whether he was piloting a Fazioli or a Ferrari.

After this rampaging opener, Stampley alluded to some destabilizing personal news — the sudden death of a friend, the Spokane-based drummer Quindrey “Drey” Davis, of leukemia — as a way into his next piece. A John Hicks composition titled “After the Morning,” it began as a rubato ballad suffused with a kind of hypercolor impressionism, before shifting into waltz time. Even here, Stampley drifted from restraint to effulgence, as if drawn there by magnetic forces. The blur of his fingers across the keys was only the most obvious indication of a command that extended to his creative pedal work, and the direction of his surging energies.

While the judges were deliberating, the evening pivoted to a gala of sorts, honoring the architect Frank Gehry with the Institute’s Herbie Hancock Humanitarian Award, for his support of arts education; and the singer Dianne Reeves with its Maria Fisher Founder’s Award. While Gehry hadn’t been able to attend, he received a duly spectacular tribute from Hélène Mercier and A Bu, performing George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” on a pair of dovetailed grand pianos.

Reeves gratefully took in her tribute from several vocal heirs — Somi, Michael Mayo and Jean Baylor, and finally Lizz Wright — and an all-star band led by pianist John Beasley. (Among others, it

If it was a wonderful situation for the finalists, it was also shot through with ambivalence — the intense pressure of their big moment, among other concerns. Still, Rohrer infused Wayne Shorter’s ballad “Someplace Called ‘Where’” with inner voicings that seemed to magically shift, like the colors in a prism. His treatment of Chick Corea’s modal workout “Matrix” was bracingly crisp, and commendable for how fully he engaged bassist Richie Goods and drummer Carl Allen, the competition’s house rhythm team. Cornish, a well-rounded modernist who also competed in the American Pianists Awards this year, likewise turned the ad hoc rhythm section



A Bu and Hélène Mercier performing in tribute to Frank Gehry at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz All-Star Concert and Gala, Oct. 15, 2023. Steve Mundinger For The Herbie Hancock Institute Of Jazz



Dianne Reeves, center, with the actor Delroy Lindo and Herbie Hancock, Oct. 15, 2023. Steve Mundinger For The Herbie Hancock Institute Of Jazz

formative support from the Philadelphia Clef Club of Jazz & Performing Arts. But in this sense, Stampley is a bit of an outlier, and a distinctly contemporary success story.

Though he is the son of a working musician, the saxophonist, pianist and vocalist D-Erania Stampley, his relationship with the piano arose almost by happenstance. “I started when I was 14,” he recently recalled on WDCB’s PianoForte Sessions. “What first got me into it was, I came across a YouTuber named P. Miller. He wore glasses, and was a Black man; he looked just like me. I just remember being so amazed, because I didn’t know people like me could play like that.” (He was especially awestruck by a version of “Paradise,” the Coldplay song.)

Stampley, a self-avowed visual learner, studied this and other YouTube clips to learn fingerings, though he eventually found mentors in the Chicago pianist and educator Robert Irving III, as well as the keyboardist Tony Cazeau, who often performs with his mother. His training since then has combined the metabolism of postmillennial internet culture with the more guild-like lessons of

featured Terri Lyne Carrington on drums and former Monk Competition winner Ben Williams on bass.) Then Reeves sang her own benediction, the standard “You Taught My Heart to Sing,” in a duo with her longtime guitarist Romero Lubambo.

The Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz is a year-round educational organization, and the competition finals came paired as usual with reminders of its programming. This included winsome performances by the Institute’s Peer-to-Peer High School Sextet, a national all-star band that travels to schools across the country; and another sextet, composed of the new class of students at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz Performance at UCLA. The trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire — a former student in that program and now its artistic director, as well as past winner of the Monk Competition — spoke admiringly of its purpose in introductory remarks.

Many of the pianists in the running this year are the beneficiaries of educational outreach along these lines: Cornish is another recent graduate of the Hancock Institute of Jazz Performance, for instance, and two of the semifinalists, Joe Block and Jordan Isaiah Williams, received

approving elders like Clarke. (Along the way, he created a mobile app called Piano Chronicles, which gamifies the experience of piano pedagogy.)

His unorthodox path surely influenced his uncontainable artistic voice, and it will be fascinating to see what the imprimatur of the Hancock Competition does for him. Surrounded by friends and well-wishers in the hall after accepting the honor, Stampley was at a loss for words, awash in gratitude but also in the surreality of it all. He again mentioned his friend, Drey Davis, who'd died the previous day. He seemed unsure about how to feel, and in that incertitude — no less than in the dazzling confidence of his winning turn — it was easy to recognize the stirrings of an artist.



Herbie Hancock and Jahari Stampley at the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz International Piano Competition, Oct. 15, 2023. Steve Mundinger For The Herbie Hancock Institute Of Jazz