

Honoree Albright hits the drums at Kennedy Center's Thelonious Monk jazz competition

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It had all the makings of an instant YouTube sensation. Late Sunday night, during the [Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz's](#) competition and gala at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater, an unexpected performer sat at the drums.

Three young drummers put on powerful performances in the Monk Institute's 25th annual contest, but in an only-in-Washington moment, the loudest applause was reserved for former secretary of state Madeleine K. Albright.

A longtime supporter of jazz who has worked with the Monk Institute for years, Albright received the annual Fisher Founder's Award. After the customary speech of thanks, she went to a drum set and pounded away on tom-toms and cymbals — quite creditably — as trumpeter Chris Botti performed an instrumental version of “Nessun dorma,” the aria from the Puccini opera “Turandot.”

The crowd erupted, and the beaming Albright wouldn't leave the stage until she made off with a pair of souvenir drumsticks.

In the past few years, the Monk competition has morphed into the closest thing jazz has to a red-carpet extravaganza. Sunday's event lasted more than three hours and included knockout performances by Aretha Franklin (singing “My Funny Valentine” and “Respect”) and jazz singers Nnenna Freelon (“Stormy Weather”) and Roberta Gambarini (“Lover Come Back to Me”).

Along with jazz superstar Herbie Hancock, the evening's emcees included Tipper Gore and actress Helen Mirren. (When Mirren introduced Franklin, the Queen of Soul, she quipped, “I know a thing or two about queens.”)

Over the evening, about two dozen musicians paraded on and off the stage in a typical gathering of all-stars — a lot of smiles, a lot of confusion and a few moments of musical joy.

Still, the centerpiece of the gathering remains the competition, which includes an award for composition — this year's winner was Yusuke Nakamura of Japan — as well as performance. This year, drums were featured for only the second time in the competition's history. Twelve young drummers from around the world took part in the semifinal competition Saturday, with three — Justin Brown, Jamison Ross and Colin Stranahan — chosen for the Sunday-night finals.

All three offered spirited performances with a trio of pianist Geoff Keezer, alto saxophonist Jon Gordon and bassist Rodney Whitaker. A panel of five judges, all distinguished jazz drummers, chose 24-year-old Ross, of Jacksonville, Fla., as the winner of the \$25,000 first prize and a recording contract with Concord Records.

Sometimes shaking a tambourine in his right hand while drumming with his left, Ross played with an easygoing, blues-soaked sense of joy. He didn't overpower the band or offer a moodscape of percussive sound effects: He just sat down and got the crowd tapping its toes to James Black's “Magnolia Triangle” and his original “Shrimp 'n' Grits.”

It was a night to make everyone smile, and no one more than Albright, who was clutching her drumsticks as she mingled with the crowd afterward. She may have unlocked the secret to international understanding: drum diplomacy.