
Jamison Ross wins the 2012 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Drums Competition

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By Bridget Arnwine

While jazz fans around the world were celebrating what would have been John Coltrane's 86th birthday, in Washington, DC it was all about a Monk named Thelonious. This past weekend the Monk Institute of Jazz hosted its annual International Jazz Competition Semi-finals, Finals and All-Star Gala concert celebrating an instrument that has only been featured once before by the Monk Competition: drums. Sunday night the three finalists—Justin Brown (Richmond, CA), Colin Stranahan (Denver, CO) and Jamison Ross (Jacksonville, FL)—performed two songs each with the judges' decision saved for the event's end. What was their decision—that 24-year-old Ross would be the recipient of the Competition's top prize of a \$25,000 scholarship and a recording contract with Concord Music. Brown was awarded the second place \$15,000 prize and Stranahan rounded out the top three with the \$10,000 prize.

Immediately following Ross' Finals Competition performance Del Bryant of BMI introduced this year's winner of the 2012 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Composers Competition, Yusuke Nakamura (Tokyo, Japan). Nakamura performed his award-winning composition "Heavenly Seven" with his trio that included bassist Masaki Imura and drummer Misaki Arai. The musicians were direct and to the point in their approach to the song. There were no extra flourishes and no exaggerated solos; the delivery was more about preserving the integrity of the composition than it was about highlighting their technical or improvisational perspicacity. Ross, Stranahan and Brown, however, were playing for their musical lives, and (to the audience's delight) it sounded like it.

Each of the gentlemen was different in his approach to the music, but they all delivered such incredible performances that by intermission and even well after the show had ended debates could be heard throughout the theater about how each man was talented enough to win. Judging by Ross' gracious, yet incredibly surprised reaction to the announcement, it's safe to assume that he felt the same way. How's that for cut-throat competition? For his part, Ross wowed the judges with his laid back, down home groove that was similar in feeling to what Herlin Riley used to bring to Wynton Marsalis' live performances. This year's Competition judges included Terri Lyne Carrington, Brian Blade, Jimmy Cobb, Ben Riley and Carl Allen.

The evening also celebrated the contributions women have made to jazz. Former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, was selected as the evening's honoree receiving the Institute's Maria Fisher Founder's Award for her involvement with the Institute and for her efforts to use jazz as a tool to bring our world leaders together. More on Secretary Albright later. The All-Star "Women, Music and Diplomacy" Gala Concert loosened up the atmosphere and gave the crowd

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permission to let down its hair as artists such as Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Geri Allen, Claire Daly, Jimmy Heath, George Duke, Linda Oh, Akua Dixon, James Carter, Randy Brecker, Jane Ira Bloom, Nnenna Freelon, Patti Austin, Gretchen Parlato, Roberta Gambarini, James Genus, Vinnie Colaiuta, Ingrid Jensen, Mark O'Connor, Chris Botti, Joe Louis Walker and the "Queen of Soul" came together to celebrate the music of Astrid Gilberto, Lena Horne, Anita O'Day, Mary Lou Williams and Ella Fitzgerald.

Probably one of the most memorable moments of the night, not including Aretha Franklin's beautiful version of "My Funny Valentine" and her party-starting, finger-waving, stand-a-little-taller-in-your-stilettos inducing version of "Respect," was when Secretary Albright sat in the drum position during Chris Botti's performance of "Nessun Dorma." Before Botti began he assured Secretary Albright he'd give her the signal for when it was ok to play and like a kid in a candy store, Secretary Albright rushed to the drums and took her position. She watched Botti and the crowd watched her, both waiting on the moment to come. And when it did, Secretary Albright gave the drums everything she had and the crowd cheered wildly. The more she banged, the louder the crowd roared. It was fantastic to see and even more fantastic to experience diplomacy in action.