

Oscar Peterson at 100: A Note of thanks to Kelly Peterson and The Royal Conservatory of Music

By Verki Michael Tunteng

Oscar Peterson's "Hymn to Freedom," one of his most famous and cherished compositions, changed my life. I remember where I was when I first heard it, and I was never the same afterwards. I remember the sense of glee when I finally got my hands on the sheet music and got to work properly learning it. I remember the other musicians who would knock on my studio door as I rehearsed the piece, wondering what it was and where it came from. Years later, at the Montreal Jazz Festival, I saw Oliver Jones and Oscar Peterson close out their one and only joint performance with Hymn to Freedom, overflowing the concert hall as they played on two pianos; the start of a sleepless night.

Mr. Peterson was born 100 years ago, and during the centenary festivities organized by Kelly Peterson and The Royal Conservatory of Music, we were treated to different interpretations of Hymn to Freedom on each of the three days. Students from the Oscar Peterson School of Music led the way with a solo piano performance, and Day 2 brought a rendition from the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, with Benny Green (heard him for the first time over 30 years ago, performing with Oscar Peterson on two pianos) at piano. The final evening saw Cécile McLorin Salvant on vocals in an ensemble that harkened back to Mr. Peterson's famous performance in Holbæk (Denmark) in 1964. Brilliance all the way through.

After knowing someone for 100 years we may start to think we've got them figured out, but Oscar Peterson still surprises us. Did you know he was a poet?

The most tender, touching words he offers in tribute to artists he cherished (Ella Fitzgerald, Art Tatum, among others), read to us by Cécile McLorin Salvant. For many of us, the experience felt magnificently disorientating – meeting someone for the first time having known them for a lifetime. There's also a beautiful symmetry; as Ms. Salvant noted, Oscar Peterson writes of those artists in the way we might write about him.

And then there's Oscar Peterson's "Africa Suite," performed for the first time by the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, brilliantly arranged by the eternally classy John Clayton. We were prepared up front to expect the characteristic "Oscar Peterson Swing", and this composition takes us to new places, tender and reflective at times, then striding fearlessly forward moments later.

There were other surprises, too. I knew of the Honorable Justice Rosalie Abella as an eminent jurist, but she brought another dimension of expertise, along with her friendship with Mr. Peterson, to moderate a panel discussion on his legacy and host the second evening concert.

Justice Abella, like so many, comes to jazz with a rich classical training. Jon Kimura Parker explored this theme, discussing Oscar Peterson's classical training and early influences, and going on to perform a Franz Liszt composition that Mr. Parker described as looking towards the future emergence

of jazz. He then went on to perform a composition, provided to him by Kelly Peterson, that could crown any jazz festival.

My deepest thanks to Kelly Peterson for her love and generosity in sharing Oscar Peterson with us and with the new generation of musicians, and thanks to The Royal Conservatory of Music for marking this historic occasion, bringing together people who loved and worked with him. My thanks also to all of the musicians and music lovers (and apologies I couldn't name you all) who performed and contributed to the celebrations.

Congratulations on your first century, Mr. Peterson.