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MUSIC

MUSIC; A Specialist In Grandpa's Favorites

By BARRY SINGER

AT 19, Peter Cincotti plays the piano like Erroll Garner and sings like Frank Sinatra, which is to say he imitates both men very well. Few singing pianists of any age have ever managed that trick.

As a result, Mr. Cincotti is at the center of an impressive promotional campaign. On Tuesday he returns to the Oak Room at the Alqonquin Hotel in Manhattan to open a monthlong engagement. Next month his debut CD, "Peter Cincotti," will be released on Concord Records. In coming weeks he is expected to be the subject of articles in Vanity Fair, Elle and Teen Vogue. He is scheduled to be a guest on "Live With Regis and Kelly," the "Today Show" and "The Late Show With David Letterman."

But who is the target of all this hype? Mr. Cincotti plays and sings the songs of Porter, Gershwin and company. As a teenage champion of the American songbook, he already has an extensive résumé: gigs in New York at Feinstein's, Joe's Pub and the Knickerbocker (while still in high school), a starring role in the Off Broadway hit "Our Sinatra," appearances at the JVC and Montreux jazz festivals and even a few nights at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas. Recognized as a piano prodigy since the age of 3, he is blessed with a chameleon-like jazz piano style, a decent singing voice and an acute ear for making the phrasing and vocal mannerisms of his elders his own.

So, is Mr. Cincotti an elders-only act? Or will he appeal to his contemporaries, many of whom don't even know what the American songbook is?

Mr. Cincotti has little doubt whom he is singing to. "One of my dreams is to expose this music to young people," he said in a recent interview at the Park Avenue apartment where he was born and still lives with his mother and older sister. "I'm 19 and I fell in love with it; others can too. I think it's just as relevant to the present and the future as it was to the past. I was brought up with this music. Most kids my age aren't. They're unaware of it."

To illustrate his point, he recalled the reaction of one of his sister's friends to a song on his CD: "She thought that I'd written 'Ain't Misbehavin.' She said, 'Oh, I love that song of yours.' It's just

amazing to me."

"I thought long and hard about recording 'Ain't Misbehavin,' " he added. "I worried -- so many greats have already sung it. Well, what the hell am I worrying about? Is 'Ain't Misbehavin' overdone? Not to my generation! And that's the generation I want to hear it."

A noble aspiration, but is it realistic? Can Mr. Cincotti, however earnest and gifted, even dent the pop music world of people his own age by playing his parents' and grandparents' music? Maybe. It doesn't hurt that Mr. Cincotti also has a heart-shaped face, bedroom eyes and a tousled head of hair. There is, in fact, a road map for this sort of selling job. It is the marketing that helped establish the careers of the singer-pianists Diana Krall and Harry Connick Jr. (Mr. Cincotti's acknowledged mentor) and the singer Jane Monheit.

All three first broke through by singing the classics, and all three are very good-looking. All played the Oak Room very early in their careers. Two of them -- Ms. Krall and Ms. Monheit -- were initially managed by Mr. Cincotti's manager, Mary Ann Topper. (Ms. Krall subsequently left Ms. Topper; Ms. Monheit is still with her.)

Today, Ms. Krall, Mr. Connick and Ms. Monheit are considered jazz artists. They have nevertheless sold lots of records -- Ms. Krall and Mr. Connick in the millions, Ms. Monheit, a few hundred thousand. Twenty-four-old Norah Jones would also seem to be a marketing role model. Her debut CD, "Come Away With Me," on the legendary Blue Note label, has been nominated for eight Grammys this year after selling more than three million copies. But Ms. Jones is hardly a jazz singer, although, like the other three, she has benefited from well-orchestrated marketing efforts.

Media campaigns of such magnitude for jazz musicians are rare, and that is largely why the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition exists.

Now in its 16th year, the Washington-based competition was pretty much invented to generate media attention for rising young jazz musicians. Focusing on a different instrumental category each year, it helped advance many important careers, both black and white, securing record deals for the saxophonist Joshua Redman, the trumpeter Ryan Kisor, and the pianists Marcus Roberts and Jacky Terrasson, among others. Its influence has waned, though, as the record industry has struggled and grown increasingly wary of any music that isn't mainstream.

Five years ago, a 20-year-old Ms. Monheit placed second at the Monk competition behind a veteran and, until then, neglected 63-year-old black singer named Teri Thornton. Within months, both women were signed to record contracts. Ms. Thornton died two years later of cancer. Ms. Monheit meanwhile began a highly publicized recording career as a "new voice" in jazz.

One year later, Eric Lewis and Orrin Evans, two black pianists in their 20's, also finished one and two. What happened after that?

"Nothing," Mr. Evans said laughing. "Absolutely nothing." Mr. Evans recorded CD's on his own and a number for the European-based Criss Cross label, before his first release in the United States, "Meant to Shine," finally came out last year on Palmetto Records. Mr. Lewis has yet to issue a record under his own name.

Why the vast discrepancy in recording credits? One answer might seem obvious: singers dominate the jazz charts. Instrumentalists, even prize-winners, are a hard-sell. But Jeff Levenson, the former vice president in charge of jazz for Columbia Records and a longtime consultant to the Monk competition, says there is more to it than that .

"Orrin Evans wore very African garb when he performed at the Monk competition," Mr. Levenson recalled. "He dressed very Afro-centrically in a way that one could only interpret as a political statement. I'm quite certain that was off-putting for some people."

He continued: "Yes, Teri Thornton was black. Her victory, though, was more a tremendous sentimental vote for someone who had survived the jazz wars and was still standing. I believe that for a large number of listeners, this kind of white jazz that Cincotti and Monheit represent is just less threatening. Not solely in terms of some perceived danger. Jazz seems intimidating to many people on many different levels, starting with the simple cerebral component of serious listening. Performers like Peter Cincotti offer a kind of warm, fuzzy, feel-good approach to jazz. It's not terribly challenging. It's just nice. It could also be that Cincotti and his music offer an alternative. He is the antithesis of a rapper, he's freshly scrubbed, he's cheery, he ain't dark, and he ain't a gangster.

"The fact that he's been signed by Concord is also very interesting," Mr. Levenson said. "Concord has always been a home for white jazz artists. So, yeah, I think that's in there, too."

Glen Barros, the president of Concord Records, disagrees.

"We certainly don't look at race when we sign an artist," he said. "We look for great artists, and Peter is in that category. We think he's going to be a superstar."

Nat Hentoff, the veteran jazz journalist, said he "had never seen a push like this Cincotti kid is getting."

But that's not the point, Mr. Hentoff added.

"The one thing true in the business today is if you're black, it ain't held against you," he said. "The bigger question is, Do black jazz artists have the contacts to get their names out there? Who you know has a great effect on who gets promoted. How many black record executives are

there now? How many business managers? Who is the man to see if you want to break in like Cincotti?"

Peter Cincotti

Concord Records; to be released on March 11. A monthlong engagement at the Oak Room, in the Algonquin Hotel, begins on Tuesday.

Photo: Peter Cincotti, a 19-year-old pianist and singer who champions the American songbook and already has an extensive résumé. (Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times)
