

## Piano Slam 5 marries music, hip-hop and poetry at Arsht Center

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Katherine Beltres (center), with Leila Zakaria (left) and Tatyana Miller, was the high school winner of Piano Slam 4.

Katherine Beltres and Eduin Turcios are, among many things, young poets. Actually, they're prize-winning young poets, winners of laptop computers thanks to their respective first-place finishes at 2012's Piano Slam 4 (Beltres won the high school division) and 2011's Piano Slam 3 (Turcios was the middle-school winner).

Inspiration, coaching and literary craftsmanship factored into their work, of course. But those poems likely wouldn't exist at all if not for the Dranoff International 2 Piano Foundation and its imaginative, poetry-loving executive director, Carlene Sawyer.

Piano Slam 5 happens at 7:30 p.m. Thursday in the Knight Concert Hall at Miami's Adrienne

Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. It's a free, one-night-only event that, like its predecessors, brings together seemingly disparate elements — classical (and other) music, hip-hop, spoken word, dance — in an exciting whole.

"Piano Slam has a number of moving parts," Sawyer says. "It's music, poetry and young people. ... We hear over and over how much kids don't like classical music and won't do something like this. That hasn't been our experience."

Evolving through its short history, Piano Slam has grown from a simple community-outreach evening of poetry and music into a directed, choreographed show in which a DJ weaves sounds, songs and beats into live classical music. The result, says Arsht president and CEO John Richard, can resonate beyond the one-night performance.

"We love to see young people on our stages," he says of the partnership with the Dranoff Foundation. "We recognize that offering budding local poets a chance to share their creativity with the entire community on one of the most prominent stages in the country can be a transformational, self-esteem-boosting experience."

Each Piano Slam begins with two-piano concerts — on a pair of 9-foot grand pianos the

foundation hauls from school to school — in Miami-area middle and high schools. Students are invited to write poetry inspired by music, with coaching from their teachers and video guidance from the slam's literary chair, the soaringly successful Miami playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney. Among McCraney's advice: Listen to the rhythms of life all around you; don't self-censor; find your own way of writing; read, read, read.

After the students finish their music-inspired work, committees read through some 1,300 poems. Those are winnowed to 600, then to 55, then to the 18 that earn their authors \$100 prizes and the chance to perform at the Arsht Center.

This year's group is made up of eight middle school students (Matthew Coleman, Louidgi Charles, Wendelle Henry, Kayla Jackson, Yaniza Figueroa, Bodacious Hammett, Alize Davis and Cherry Sharma) and 10 high schoolers (Miles Iton, Kadeem Navarro, Melanie Bacetty, Ashley Aviles, Celestelle Webster, Mary-Kate Bruce, Diane Petit-Frere, Sharlene Dieu, Emily Grace and, once again, Turcios, now a 16-year-old sophomore at Miami Jackson Senior High).

Beltres, 18, who is majoring in criminal justice with a minor in English at Florida Memorial University, remembers performing her poem at the Arsht as "an amazing adrenaline rush." Turcios, who gets a shot at the high-school prize on Thursday, was nervous when he first tackled Piano Slam in middle school.

"It was my first time performing in front of people. My heart was beating so fast. But onstage, it was cool," he says. "Now I'm a hip-hop artist. I like writing poetry and making music. Piano Slam was the stepping stone for me — it opened up many doors."

Music is, of course, at the heart of Piano Slam. This year's featured pianists, the husband-wife duo of Marcel and Elizabeth Bergmann, have chosen an eclectic program: Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dance No.1*, Chick Corea's *La Fiesta*, Leonard Bernstein's *Mambo* from *West Side Story*, Olivier Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* and *Urban Pulse*, a Marcel Bergmann piece commissioned by the Dranoff Foundation.

The Bergmanns, former Dranoff International 2 Piano Competition winners, traveled to Miami from their home in Hamilton, Ontario, in February for a workshop with the event's DJ, Brimstone 127 (aka Seth "Brimstone" Schere), and director Teo Castellanos. What evolved wasn't what they expected.

"It's interesting how the creative process works," Elizabeth Bergmann says. "We had ideas written down, classical pieces that we thought would lend themselves to remixing and sampling. But you just have to be open. You have to try things and see where they take you. When we would play something, it would remind Brimstone 127 of something else. The most important thing is that the musicians are collaborative."

Of *Urban Pulse*, which will be the recurring centerpiece of Piano Slam, Marcel Bergmann says, "I wanted to write something that was fun to play. I've always been interested in jazz and pop, and it worked out well. Duos have continued to play it, and we've been playing it quite a bit. This is the second time it has been chosen for Piano Slam."

Brimstone 127 (from Miami's Southwest 127th Street, where he grew up) says that making the classical music work with what he does is tricky.

“Electronic music always locks into a 4/4 beat, but classical is often 3/4. I like to challenge myself. I use the hip-hop technique of looping. We freestyle,” he says.

“This is my favorite performance thing all year. I get to work with youth and top-of-the-line piano players from all over the world. And it’s in the Arsht Center, not a club.”

Of the young poets, Brimstone 127 says, “I can really hear me in them, how the sounds of the city inspire them. Arts programs are being cut, and this gives the kids a platform to speak their souls. They get to express themselves through art. Their parents go *bananas*.”

Castellanos, founder of the dance-theater company Teo Castellanos D-Projects, is the guy who has to make the disparate elements of Piano Slam come together. One of his larger challenges is getting inexperienced students to feel comfortable performing their work at the city’s showcase arts center.

“Sometimes I can get them over their nervousness, sometimes I can’t. They get a crash course in delivery, dynamics, vocal qualities and movement,” he says. “Last year, I had two young ladies who could not be more soft-spoken and terrified of the stage. The way I figured out how they should deliver the text was to speak it to each other.”

Castellanos, who mentored McCraney when the celebrated playwright was a teen, agrees with his former student’s advice to the young Piano Slam poets. He also recognizes the elements that novice writers can tap into in order to create award-winning poems.

“At that age, kids don’t have a whole lot of worldly knowledge or experience,” Castellanos says. “However, we all have feelings, dreams and aspirations.”