

CONCERTS: TODAY'S OSCAR PETERSON TRIBUTE

In praise of the magnificent 'OP'

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It's not hard to understand why American singer [Nancy Wilson](#) jumped at the chance to pay tribute to jazz pianist Oscar Peterson in today's memorial concert at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto.

Even though she wasn't part of his musical circle, she says, "The man's name has been in my life pretty much all my life. I never worked with him. But I watched him, and was absolutely amazed by his capabilities at the piano. I've never seen anybody devour a piano like that. His work was magnificent."

Wilson, 70, came up a generation behind Peterson, who died last month at age 82. By the time she had her first hit, in 1960 with *Guess Who I Saw Today*, Peterson was no longer spending time as an accompanist. "I was still a kid, basically just starting," she says. "So I never got an opportunity to really work with him.

"But I loved him and heard him a lot with Ella [Fitzgerald]. I've just always thought of him as one of the grand masters of the piano, one who absolutely knew everything there was to know about the piano."

This afternoon, she plans to pay tribute to "OP," as she refers to the great jazz pianist, with the Gordon Jenkins song *Goodbye*. She'll be accompanied by pianist Monty Alexander and a quartet rounded out by drummer Jeff Hamilton and long-time Peterson accompanists Ulf Wakenius on guitar and Dave Young on bass.

"I've not done that with [Alexander]," she adds. "The only people I've done it with are my trio. But that song, to me, would be appropriate, and it's something I know."

Dubbed *Oscar Peterson -- Simply the Best*, the 90-minute tribute will feature such jazz greats as American pianist Herbie Hancock, producer and bandleader Quincy Jones (who will be sharing reminiscences along with Canadian jazz clarinetist Phil Nimmins), Japanese pianist Makoto Ozone, and singers Hilary Kole and Gregory Charles. Operatic soprano Measha Bruegggosman will sing Peterson's *Hymn to Freedom*, backed by the combined voices of the Faith Chorale, the Nathaniel Dett Chorale and the University of Toronto Gospel Choir, under the direction of Molly Johnson pianist Andrew Craig.

Wilson admits that, given Peterson's stature, it's a bit intimidating to step onto a stage and play something in his memory - particularly for the pianists. "It has to be hard, but see, we will bring something different to it," she says. "Monty will not be trying to play like

Oscar, and I won't be trying to sing like Ella. We hope to bring a beautiful piece of music that says appropriately how much we loved him."

It has been a hectic week for the singer. "I almost didn't make it, because I have had the stomach flu and I have a husband who just had a kidney removed," she says. "But I got here, and that's what's important." She's in Toronto for the annual International Association for Jazz Education conference, where she serves as hostess for the annual Jazz Masters gala. "I've been the gala hostess for - oh, dear, since they started having galas, which I guess has been nine years," she says. "I'm always there for IAJE."

Indeed, she says, "the last time I saw Oscar was here in Toronto." Peterson received the IAJE President's Award in 2003. "It was just wonderful to be a part of that."

Oscar Peterson - Simply the Best takes place at 4 p.m. today at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall. Admission is free, on a first-come, first-served basis. The concert will be broadcast live on CBC Radio One, beginning at 4:05 p.m., and rebroadcast at 8:05 p.m. on CBC Radio Two.