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Amateurs With a Deft Touch

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Amateur piano competitions have proliferated over the past decade or so, but let's be clear: These are not amateur in the derogatory sense of inept or unskilled, but rather in the original sense, borrowed from the French, meaning one who loves something. Modern musicians are lucky if, following the intense rigors and fierce competition of lengthy professional training, they emerge with something of their original amateur enthusiasm left intact. Meanwhile, there are thousands of fine players and singers who avidly pursue music but, for one reason or another, choose not to make it their profession. It is this vast pool of talent that amateur competitions, such as the one sponsored by the Washington International Piano Arts Council, seek to encourage and recognize.

WIPAC presented two recent laureates of international amateur competitions, Masanori Murakami of Osaka, Japan, and Henri Delbeau of New York, at the Mexican Cultural Institute on Thursday night. Murakami is a relaxed and self-assured pianist who seems incapable of an inexpressive gesture. His three fiery "Danzas Argentinas" by Alberto Ginastera were brightly colored and filled with rhythmic vitality. Murakami gave Liszt's "Spanish Rhapsody" a strikingly original reading, emphasizing its unconventional harmonic structure and lyricism.

Delbeau is a very different musician, poised and introspective. In the second section of "Images," he probed subtleties of detail and color nuance. The kaleidoscopic effects of the last piece, "Poisson d'Or," were brilliant. However, it was in three Chopin waltzes that Delbeau seemed most at home. Here his singing tone was given free reign, underpinned with an infallible kinesthetic lilt, to create performances that were both refined and deeply personal. Both men honored their hosts with charming vignettes by the Mexican composer Manuel Ponce.

Oh, by the way, Delbeau, winner of the 2007 Berlin International Piano Amateur Competition, is an internist and assistant director of the medical residency program at Long Island Jewish Hospital; Murakami, who won first place in last year's Concours International des Grands Amateurs de Piano in Paris, is working toward his master's degree in molecular biology at the University of Ritsumeikan. Long live the amateurs!