

# Butch Thompson in fine concert of Jelly Roll Morton piano music

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By Michael Anthony  
Staff Writer

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## A review

Although Butch Thompson lives in St. Paul, his career has expanded to international scope over the past decade, which means that his local performances are few and far between. It was no surprise that Thompson nearly filled the auditorium of the Minnesota History Center Sunday afternoon for a concert of piano music by Jelly Roll Morton.

Thompson has cornered the market on Morton. He was a consultant on “Jelly’s Last Jam,” the Broadway show on Morton’s life, and last year, when a New York nightclub wanted to put together a show of Morton’s music, it called Thompson. Twenty years ago, the world was rediscovering Scott Joplin and ragtime; now it’s Morton and early jazz.

Morton, of course, claimed that he invented jazz. Thompson read to the audience a famous letter that Morton wrote in 1938 in which he protested a claim made on radio by W.C. Handy that he was the inventor of jazz. Obviously, no one person invented America’s most original contribution to music, even though Morton was surely a more legitimate contender for that honor than Handy, who wrote “St. Louis Blues.” The problem was that by 1938, when Alan Lomax rediscovered Morton and recorded him in a priceless series of interviews at the Library of Congress, Morton was down and out. Life—and later developments in jazz—had passed him by. Having a pretty large ego to begin with, Morton felt that he hadn’t been given sufficient recognition, and so it’s understandable that he would make some grand statements on his own behalf.

Morton was the first important jazz composer. Born in 1890 in New Orleans, he went on to fuse a number of Afro-American musical idioms — from ragtime to spirituals — with Hispanic music from the Caribbean and white popular songs, giving his amalgam a compositional depth that never lost its spontaneity.

Cleverly, Thompson articulates all the diverse strands of Morton’s jazz tapestry. The first part of yesterday’s program dealt with Morton’s influences: ragtime, blues and, in a lovely but rhythmically tricky number called “The Crave,” what Morton came to call the “Spanish tinge,” where a tango rhythm underscores jazz figures. Thompson added a surprise to the list: Morton’s swinging version of the “Miserere” from Verdi’s “Il Trovatore,” partly to show that “hit tunes” from Italian opera were part of the popular music of the day in New Orleans.

Thompson has been studying and playing this music most of his life. He’s a purist, which means he gets the notes right — all of them — while never losing the music’s buoyancy and swing. He keeps a light touch, and his blues playing, is a lesson in economy. Where other pianists (and blues guitarists) might play a dozen notes, Thompson plays one, but it’s the right one, and it’s amazing how much emotion comes through in the music when it’s not forced or gussied up. Conversely, in numbers such as “Finger Breaker” or Tony Jackson’s “Naked Dance,” where an almost superhuman technique is required, Thompson takes no back seat to anyone — even to Morton himself, whose recordings are still very much with us.

A special moment in the first half was Thompson’s delicate account of “Solace,” a slow Joplin tune with a marked strain of sadness. Again, Thompson got it right, remembering the slight but all-important pause before each statement of the main theme. Thompson hinted to the audience that this concert might be the first of a series at the History Center.

Let’s hope so.