



Oscar Peterson: A Jazz Sensation / Oscar Peterson: une sensation jazz. Exhibition at the National Library of Canada, Ottawa / Une exposition à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada, Ottawa, July 1, 2000-Sept. 3, 2001. Web site: www.nlc-bnc.ca/oscarpeterson

The National Library of Canada has mounted a glorious exhibition and Web site to mark the 75th birthday of Oscar Peterson. The exhibition opened in the library's main exhibit area on June 30, 2000, to a large and enthusiastic crowd of invited guests, including myself. Peterson, accompanied by members of his family, attended the opening and expressed his gratitude to the library. Roch Carrier, National Librarian, thanked Peterson for depositing his papers with the Music Division since 1991. Contributing to the magic of the evening was Wray Downes, a former Peterson student who, with his trio, played a selection of Peterson's jazz compositions before a rapt audience.

According to Timothy Maloney, head of the Music Division and curator of the exhibit, assisted by Maureen Nevins, most of the items included in the exhibition and Web site are drawn from the *Oscar Peterson Fonds*. The *fonds* is available online in PDF format (www.nlc-bnc.ca/4/12/index-e.html). It contains textual records, hundreds of photographs, biographical records, slipcases of recordings, correspondence, concert programs, newspaper clippings, concert tickets, invitations, diplomas, texts of interviews, press clippings, awards, tributes and many other primary source documents.

At the entrance of the exhibition, strikingly elevated upon a red-carpeted platform, a concert grand Yamaha Disklavier

softly plays Peterson's recordings. The walls of the exhibit hall are painted dramatically purple, and the skillful lighting shows the exhibit's myriad of colourful, contrasting materials. Text is bilingual, clear, and easy to read.

While strolling through the exhibit hall, one follows Peterson's life journey, beginning with his early years in Montreal and continuing with his rise to fame as an international jazz virtuoso, as well as receiving countless honorary awards and doctorates. Instead of a strictly chronological display, the curators have opted to create upright panels and cases depicting the various aspects of Peterson's life and career.

For example, under "Oscar Peterson, St. Antoine," there is an exhibit case devoted to Peterson's family and early life in Montreal. Peterson's father was a porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway, and there are photographs of the CPR's Montreal operations, archival information on the role of the black porter, and a *CPR Bulletin*. At the same time, one can pick up headphones and watch a video of Peterson speaking or performing. Also interviewed is his sister, Daisy Peterson Sweeney, who was Oscar's first piano teacher.

Under "Jazz at the Philharmonic," there is a facsimile of Peterson's celebrated 78-rpm recording of "Tenderly," a telegram to Peterson from impresario Norman Granz, and an excerpt from the video, "The Jazz at the Philharmonic All-Stars at the Opera House," recorded in Chicago in 1955. Under "Oscar Peterson in

Popular Culture,” there is a facsimile of a 16-inch, vertical-cut, transcription disc produced in New York in 1952 for radio stations. Another exhibit case shows Peterson in his sophisticated home electronic studio and describes his use of CD-ROM’s and the Internet. (Peterson’s own official Web site is entitled *A Tribute to...Oscar Peterson*, [www.oscarpeterson.com /op/index.html](http://www.oscarpeterson.com/op/index.html).)

The cases are arranged in a circular fashion. In a small corner room with café-style round tables, one can listen to Peterson’s records and leaf through jazz magazines. In another corner is the *Oscar Peterson Multimedia CD-ROM*, and near this is a PC which connects to the exhibition’s Web site.

The site is also entitled *Oscar Peterson: A Jazz Sensation*. It is constructed with logic, simplicity and style in predominant colors of purple, red and white, appearing upon a solid black background. Appearing artistically on the site’s first page is a photo of Peterson’s hands dating from the 1940’s. This picture also appears on the exhibit program, the *fonds*, and other publicity. (This photo, taken by D.C. Langford, also appears at the beginning of this review, and is used courtesy of the Canadian Pacific Archives.)

The site is bilingual, has an Oscar Peterson logo, and links that are cleverly superimposed upon a silhouette of Peterson in a chart format. The chart allows one to choose themes such as the man, the legend, an audio tour, and site information or sources. The presentation is similar to that of the physical exhibition.

The theme, “Oscar Peterson, the Man,” contains sections on biography, honors, friends, and a photo gallery. The biography

then subdivides into background, musical training, influences, and career. The background includes links to the sites of jazz artists with whom Peterson has worked. Navigation is clear and easy, and texts throughout are illustrated by photographs. The photo gallery gives the viewer an inviting overall glimpse of the dozens of photographs in the National Library’s collection. A click on a particular photograph instantly enlarges it and in most cases provides additional identification.

The “Friends” section consists of photographs of eminent musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles and Phil Nimmons. Peterson’s tribute to “Lady Fitz” (Ella Fitzgerald) following her death in 1996 is also included, and there are details on the Advanced School of Contemporary Music (1959-64) that Peterson with his colleagues established for the purpose of educating young jazz musicians.

“The Legend” is divided into compositions, memorabilia and articles. The latter includes excerpts from newspaper and magazine articles by or about Peterson in addition to concise annotations on their content. A click upon the article’s title reveals an image of the original text, such as Peterson’s essay, “Peace,” written to celebrate the International Year of Peace in 1986. The compositions include his well-known *Canadiana Suite*. A click brings up a copy of the actual printed music and a further click transports one to the audio tour, where one may listen to samples from the recordings.

Take the tour! There are 47 selections and more than 100 Peterson albums. Choose “selected music” for a list of his recordings by

decade. By clicking on a particular title, a colorful image of the slipcase appears as well as a complete list of the pieces and details of the album. A flashing but discreet graphic indicates which pieces are accessible for listening.

The Web site and the exhibition complement each other. The exhibition encourages the viewer to become immersed in Peterson's world by experiencing simultaneously texts, photos, recordings and videos. The wealth and variety of materials are consistently well organized. The site provides detailed information that would have been impossible to include in the exhibition. It allows one to focus upon a particular aspect without becoming lost in a maze of information or images. One feels effortlessly guided, almost as though taking a physical tour of the exhibition. The design and layout contributes to the visual clarity and appeal.

Both the exhibition and the site give us insights into the multiple facets of Peterson's life and work. Oscar Peterson is presented not only as a jazz icon, but as an educator, writer, humanitarian and supporter of world peace.

The Music Division and the Web site team are to be congratulated upon their work. It is truly an outstanding tribute to Oscar Peterson which gives us the opportunity to celebrate this great artist in his lifetime. Although the exhibit closes on Sept. 3, 2001, the Web site will continue as part of the Digital Library of Canada, providing jazz lovers, performers and researchers with virtual access to Peterson and his legacy in the years to come. In addition, the National Library is planning to create a permanent touring exhibition that will appear at embassies, festivals and other venues around the world.

*Debra Ann Begg
Musicothèque / Music Library
Université d'Ottawa*

