

The Kennedy Center Honors felt different, and it was all because of ‘Hamilton’

By Peter Marks

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Cher, Reba McEntire, and the creators of the Broadway musical "Hamilton" received this year's Kennedy Center Honors in the District on Dec. 2. (Reuters)

The Kennedy Center Honors stepped out of its comfort zone Sunday night, conferring recognition for the first time on a living, breathing work of art, along with four seasoned — and also living and breathing — American artists. And the change felt both fresh and a little fraught.

By adding a popular musical, the universally celebrated “Hamilton,” to a historic list of honorees that has run alphabetically over the past 41 years from George Abbott to Joanne Woodward, the Kennedy Center radically revised the rules and, in a way, the lavish ceremony that fetes the winners. The other winners this year were singer and actress Cher, country music star Reba McEntire, jazz great Wayne Shorter and avant-garde composer Philip Glass.

The joyful aspect was in infusing the program — a show to be broadcast on CBS, after all, as well as a fundraiser — with the music and star power of a dazzling Broadway blockbuster and a quartet of artists at the pinnacle of their careers. It is likely that in doling out special Honors to “Hamilton” composer Lin-Manuel Miranda, director Thomas Kail, music director Alex Lacamoire and choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler, the arts center is making a direct appeal to a younger audience for the relevance of the awards.

But as the ceremony’s “Hamilton” segment went about showcasing some of the original Broadway cast members — Phillipa Soo, Renée Elise Goldsberry and Jasmine Cephas Jones, the original Schuyler sisters, and Christopher Jackson and Miranda — a question lingered in the Opera House air. Is this award a one-off? Is “Hamilton” the only American-made artistic product of sufficient impact to disrupt the tradition of giving the prizes for individual lifetime achievement? And if not, what comes next?

It remains to be seen, of course, if this year was a breakthrough or an opportunistic exception. In the meantime, the production itself, divided as always into five distinct segments and directed by Glenn Weiss, unfolded as a kind of superstore of acts, mostly musical but some spoken or comic. Gloria Estefan, a 2017 honoree, served as master of ceremonies for a cast that included such luminaries as Renée Fleming, Cyndi Lauper, Herbie Hancock, Kristin Chenoweth, S. Epatha Merkerson, Amanda Seyfried, Adam Lambert, Kelly Clarkson, Jennifer Koh, Esperanza Spalding and St. Vincent.



The 2018 Kennedy Center honorees appeared on the Opera House stage at the top of the show. Back row, from left: Thomas Kail, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Andy Blankenbuehler and Alex Lacamoire. Front row, from left: Wayne Shorter, Cher, Reba McEntire and Philip Glass. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

It's in-cred-ibly hard to boil down the lifetimes of the honorees to 25 minutes of material, to do justice to a life devoted, for instance, to finding “so many ways to make his horn sound like the human voice,” as Wynton Marsalis commented in a short film shown about Shorter, the jazz composer. And in some cases, the praise was so syrupy, it could have stuck to your shoes. “Reba, on behalf of Earth and the universe and from worlds beyond, thank you so much for sharing those gifts with us,” gushed the comic actress Melissa Peterman, a co-star of McEntire’s on the WB sitcom “Reba.”

Whoopi Goldberg, in introducing the night’s final segment, extolling Cher, did Peterman one better. “Elvis. Sinatra. Cher,” she declared, grandly.

It was, as usual, the exceptional musical acts that fueled the evening’s ecstatic engines. Clarkson, McEntire’s daughter-in-law, belted out a divine version of

McEntire’s “Fancy,” and Jackson delivered a rafter-raising rendition of George Washington’s “One Last Time” from “Hamilton” that evolved into a buoyant ensemble number with the local members of the Voices of America Youth Choir. The participation of Miranda and Lacamoire, on piano, in the number, by the way, represented the first time that honorees have performed at their own celebration.

Lambert, turning up for the Cher tribute, made an event high point of Cher’s 1998 hit “Believe,” and Lauper materialized immediately after and got the audience on its feet to bop along with “If I Could Turn Back Time.” From the Opera House box that the winners shared with such officials as Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., a glowing Cher could be seen, tearfully taking in the moment. (As was expected, President Trump was a no-show again this year.)

A few interludes fell a bit flat in the hall: Chenoweth, wearing sparkly boots and singing “Doin’ What Comes Natur’lly” from “Annie Get Your Gun,” in which McEntire appeared on Broadway in 2001, came across weakly. And though Soo, Goldsberry and Jones sounded splendid as the trio sang “The Schuyler Sisters,” one ached to hear Soo sing “Helpless” or Goldsberry lead us through the brilliant “Satisfied” from “Hamilton.” One drawback of featuring a current Broadway production, perhaps, is the possibility that its producers may be reluctant about sharing the musical’s biggest numbers.

But the segment on the career of Shorter consisted of two extraordinary pieces. The first was an extended jazz session on a nightclub set, with instrumentalist Hancock and jazz vocalist Spalding. That was followed by Fleming performing a jazz aria from one of the prolific Shorter’s newest works. I am not sure how these pieces will play on the CBS broadcast, on Dec. 26 at 8

p.m. But their beauty demonstrated how crucial is the ongoing inclusion of the legends of jazz in the Honors annals.

Another stirring interlude was crafted for Glass’s oeuvre: The Philip Glass Ensemble and the Washington Chorus performed selections from the score of the film “Koyaanisqatsi,” and Koh joined the chorus and Merckerson for “Knee Play 5” from Glass’s four-act 1976 opera, “Einstein at the Beach.” Maybe the most memorable portion of his tribute was Jon Batiste on the piano, performing the multihued opening of the chamber piece “Glassworks.”



Philip Glass, considered one of the most influential composers of the 20th century, talks about his first job breaking records in his father's store. (Video: Zoeann Murphy/Photo: Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

Smooth and on time, the show mentioned current events only once, and that was an homage to another American of estimable achievement, the 41st president, George H.W. Bush, who died Friday. Estefan was emotional as she told a story about receiving a consoling call from Bush after her near-fatal bus accident. The sustained ovation that followed was one of the longest in an evening full of them.

Peggy McGlone contributed to this report.