Japan-born ballerina O’Neill wins prestigious Benois prize

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MOSCOW – Dancer Hannah O’Neill on Tuesday won the prestigious award for the ballerina category in the Benois de la Danse competition, becoming only the second recipient from Japan to do so.

The 23-year-old O’Neill, of New Zealand and Japanese parents, is a premier dancer with the Paris Opera Ballet. She shared the prize with Alicia Amatriain from the Stuttgart Ballet in Germany. She won the Russian award for her title role in the classic “Paquita” at the Paris Opera Ballet.

Mariko Kida of the Royal Swedish Ballet was the first Japanese ballerina to win the prize in 2014. O’Neill’s Japanese mother, Sumie, quoted her daughter as saying she could not believe she had won and was lost for words. O’Neill was born in Tokyo and lived there until she was 8.

O’Neill began her career with the Paris Opera Ballet in 2011. In 2014, she won the silver medal at the Varna International Ballet Competition.

This year’s winners of the Benois award were announced at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. The annual award was created in 1992 to recognize the world’s most accomplished dancers and choreographers. Previous winners include French dancer Sylvie Guillem and Swiss dancer and director Maurice Bejart.