In 1958, at a time when America was in the throes of a national state of anxiety over the Soviet Union’s successful launch of their Sputnik space satellites, the Tchaikovsky International Music Competition was introduced--designed to elevate the status of the communist nation even higher by proving Russian superiority in art as well as in science. The jury for the piano portion of the contest (there was a violin portion as well) was heavily weighted with Soviet musical greats, including pianists Sviatoslav Richter and Emil Gilels, and composers Dmitri Kabalevsky and Aram Khachaturian. Competition authorities had planned for a Soviet player to win. But when a 23-year-old American from Texas named Van Cliburn played Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff with soul-rending mastery, the Russian public--already charmed by Mr. Cliburn’s warmth and homespun manner--went wild. It became impossible to award first place to anyone else; the jury, equally spellbound by his artistry, requested permission to give him the prize, and Soviet Premiere Nikita Khrushchev felt compelled to grant official consent.

In that moment, political normalcy was shattered. Yet, in a sense, the stars had been aligned for just this outcome. There was already tremendous curiosity on the part of the Russian public about the West, especially among Soviet youth voracious for movies (particularly Tarzan and Westerns), music (rock and jazz, even though they were banned), and other aspects of American life. The post-Stalin years had emboldened many of the jury members, who seemed to celebrate the American’s win as a small victory of their own against the political establishment. And then there was the Cliburn style--a luscious “magnolia blossom” sound (in the words of one Texas patron), infused with a kind of grand Romantic passion that had been all but drained out of students in the conformist programs of Soviet schools. Van Cliburn’s pianism conveyed, above all, a sublime sense of expressive freedom. For some Soviet listeners, it represented democracy itself.

In the light of the American’s victory, the Soviets tried to save face by pointing out that his Juilliard teacher, Rosina Lhevinne--his principle mentor after childhood lessons with his mother, Rildia Bee, and a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory--was an exemplar of their tradition. But, in internal political documents, they expressed consternation and disappointment with their own.

Playing Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Liszt, Taneyev, Prokofiev, Beethoven, Brahms, Barber, Kabalevsky, and Tchaikovsky with utmost flair, Cliburn solidified his win by conveying concertos by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff with spellbinding artistry. “That was the great paradox of the competition,” American pianist Jerome Lowenthal later said. “The
Russians had convinced themselves that they knew the heart of this repertoire. But the heart had just gone out of it, and it had become really quite routine. When they heard Van, they suddenly remembered how beautiful this music was.”

He touched even uneducated listeners in remarkable ways. Pianist Nina Lelchuk, then a 15-year-old teaching assistant at the Moscow Conservatory, found a janitor weeping after Cliburn’s performance of the lullaby-like slow movement of the Tchaikovsky. “The man cradled his arms and gently swung them from side to side,” she remembered. “‘It felt like he was rocking a baby,’ he reported, with tears in his eyes.” The reaction was nearly universal.

On his return to America, the conquering hero--now known as the “American Sputnik,” though he didn’t have a political bone in his body--was given a ticker-tape parade down New York’s Broadway. RCA Victor signed him to an exclusive recording contract, and his first project for them was a performance on May 30, 1958 of the Tchaikovsky First Concerto conducted by Kirill Kondrashin, the Russian with whom he had achieved his great success in Moscow. The recording won a Grammy Award that year; was certified as “gold” in 1961; and achieved “platinum” status in 1989. He became the first classical artist ever to have a million selling record. Before long he was performing in stadiums--and nearly everywhere the crowds demanded the Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto. Mr. Cliburn had achieved success in previous competitions, notably the prestigious Leventritt, whose winners had included Eugene Istomin, Alexis Weissenberg and Gary Graffman, but nothing had prepared him for this.

Suddenly, he was eclipsing the greatest names in music. When he joined with Igor Stravinsky at the 1962 World’s Fair--the young pianist, in typical fashion, insisted on carrying the composer’s heavy bags to their backstage dressing rooms--Mr. Cliburn performed Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto to a packed house on the first half of the program. After intermission, the greatest composer of the 20th century took to the stage to conduct his masterpiece, “The Firebird.” The hall was half-empty.

“I’m not a success,” Cliburn announced with stunning foresight after winning in Moscow. “I’m just a sensation.” Yet, this pianist, who readily admitted he did not like to practice, became a slave to his celebrity. Some advisors--including Kondrashin--warned that he should curtail his appearances to study, practice, and learn new repertoire. That wasn’t in the cards.

Cliburn became a tortured soul. As the years passed, the critics found that his sound--described by fellow Juilliard classmate Jeaneane Dowis as so natural it seemed to come “from the birds and the bees and the trees and the air”--had begun to lose its luster. His eccentricities, curious social associations, and exaggerated persona--on the public stage, Van Cliburn could veer toward affected grandiosity or oversaturated sentimentality--now seemed to capture more attention than the playing. Starting in 1975, he began to think about withdrawing from the concert scene; three years later he had. The resumption of that career after a 12-year break turned out to be half-hearted--he even limited the number of engagements by demanding outlandish fees.

His name is still magical in Russia, which became a second home to which he returned often. His win invigorated fledgling efforts at cultural exchange between the two nations. Many of his recordings are things of rare beauty, and his example stood as an inspiration to countless young pianists. The competition in Ft. Worth that was spurred by his success has given emerging piano hopefuls a worldwide platform. In the end, despite the troubles, his achievements were considerable.

Stuart Isacoff is a winner of the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for excellence in writing about music, and a frequent contributor on the arts to “The Wall Street Journal.” He is a pianist and

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