

Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto, No. 1--Van Cliburn (April 11, 1958)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Van Cliburn, c. 1958



Van Cliburn in Russia

Cold Wars are not fought the same way as regular wars. Victory is not counted in terms of land gained or bullets fired. For the long-running US-Soviet Cold War, which endured from 1947 to, more or less, the late 1980s, “winning” was measured via Olympic medals, the space race and, once, in 1958 via the nimble, virtuoso piano playing of a young, shaggy-haired Texan boy named Van Cliburn.

Cliburn was a piano prodigy from the Lone Star State when he stunned the world and became an American hero by being named the winner of Russia’s inaugural International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition.

Held in Moscow in April of 1958, few expected anyone but a Russian national to claim the top prize. Cliburn’s definitive win was a shock to the Soviets...and to the rest of the world.

Harvey Lavan Cliburn, Jr. was born in July of 1934 in Shreveport, Louisiana. At age six, he and his family relocated to Kilgore, Texas (population: 10,500). Cliburn’s father worked in the oil industry; his mother was a trained classical pianist, who had once studied under Arthur Friedheim. She earned extra money by giving piano lessons to area children. Cliburn began taking his own piano lessons at age three, allegedly after his mother saw him skillfully mimicking one of her students. He was soon reading music scores, before he could read words.

Cliburn had a natural gift. He played in public for the first time when he was four. By the time he was 12, he was playing with the Houston Symphony. At 17, after graduating from high school, he was off to New York to study at Julliard. In 1954, he won the prestigious Leventritt Foundation award and had already made his debut with five major orchestras across the country, including the New York Philharmonic. That same year, he also signed his first recording contract with Columbia Records.

But, despite his growing notoriety in classical circles, it would not be until his 1958 trip to Russia that Cliburn would become a true legend—all at the tender age of 23. Entering the overseas competition at the suggestion of his former teacher, Rosina Lhevinne, Cliburn is rumored to have locked himself in his New York apartment with his grand piano and, for days on end, diligently practiced his repertoire for the upcoming contest. He prepared several challenging pieces, including the work that had already become his signature, Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto, No 1.

Cliburn's trip to the USSR—as well as that of co-competitor, violinist Joyce Fessler--was paid for by the Mary Baird Rockefeller Foundation and the Institute for International Education. His expenses while in the Soviet Union were picked up by the Soviet government.

According to published reports, though he was a foreigner, at the competition, Cliburn quickly won over his Soviet audiences, not only with his talent but also with his youth and bashful, almost geeky, charm. As he completed each round of the competition, his popularity grew. His introductory performances—of a Bach prelude and a Mozart sonata, among other pieces--became sold-out affairs. Breaking with protocol, he was often forced to stand up and acknowledge the audience's accolades.

On stage for the final round, in front of a packed audience in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, Cliburn performed three pieces: the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto; Rondo in A Minor, a work by Dimitry Kabalevsky; and the Tchaikovsky First Concerto.

As unassuming as he was off stage was a determined as Cliburn was on stage. When in performance, he stared diligently and transfixed; sometimes he seemed to scowl at the keys. His face and body could become contorted as well as he bore down on the piano and threw himself fully into the piece he was playing.

At the conclusion of his final Russian performance, when Cliburn had finished his final measure, the crowd erupted. "First prize! First prize!" the audience screamed as others tossed flowers onto the stage. One of the judges, Soviet pianist Emil Gilels, even rushed backstage to embrace the young virtuoso.

"New York Times" reporter Max Frankel, who was covering the contest for the American paper, said of Cliburn's performance, "It was magnificent, romantic but so clean. The technique was extraordinary."

Still, despite the vocal support, Cliburn's victory was far from assured. Though he performed masterly, would a foreign performer—an American especially—be allowed to claim the top prize of this Russian-hosted competition?

After the judges made their decision to name Van Cliburn the winner, the Soviet Ministry of Culture hurried to express his concerns about the selection to a Communist Party official and then to Khrushchev. According to Mr. Khrushchev's son, Sergei Khrushchev, the discussion between the envoy and the premier was brief. "The jury says the American is the best, but..."

"Is the American really the best?" Mr. Khrushchev asked.

"Yes."

"So you have to give him the prize," Khrushchev replied.

News of Cliburn's unexpected win swept the globe quickly. Literally overnight, the Texan piano player became a household name and a national folk hero.

After collecting his winnings of 25,000 rubles (about \$2,500 US), Cliburn returned to the States loaded down with gifts from his new Russian fans.

Back stateside, Cliburn landed on the cover of "Time" magazine and received a ticker-tape parade down Broadway where some 100,000 cheered him upon his triumphant return. (Cliburn remains the only classical musician ever afforded such an honor.) Cliburn also made his way

into an RCA recording studio to commit to vinyl his winning pieces. The resulting record, when released, became the first classical recording to ever sell one million copies.

Of course, it wasn't just classical music aficionados who were buying though: Cliburn's boyish looks, slender six-foot-four frame, and mop of blond hair (which he was consistently unable to tame) also made him an instant, and surprising, teen idol. The year of his victory, Cliburn got as much press as the then reigning king of rock and roll, Elvis Presley.

Cliburn's popularity, patriotic victory and fine musicianship also scored Cliburn a host of invitations—to the White House to play for Eisenhower, to perform four concerts at Carnegie Hall (resulting in the biggest demand for tickets the Hall had ever received up to that time), to appear on CBS-TV's "Person to Person," and on Steve Allen's "Tonight Show" on NBC. Magazine and newspapers also covered and interviewed the young maestro everywhere he went including on his sold-out, coast-to-coast concert tour that took him to Philadelphia, Chicago, Denver and Hollywood, among other US cities. Dutifully, at each performance he repeated his award-winning Russian program, among other works (including the "Star-Spangled Banner" which he often began each of his concerts with).

Devoutly religious, a lifelong non-drinker and unfailingly modest, for the next 20 years, Van Cliburn, "The Texan Who Conquered Russia," as he was sometimes called, kept up a busy performing, recording and appearance schedule.

In 1978, however, he undertook a self-imposed retirement that removed him from the stage. He returned to Texas where he purchased a grand home in the Fort Worth area. He would share the home with his mother until the end of her life in 1994.

Cliburn did not return to the stage again until 1987 when he began to put on some modest performances. That year he performed at a summit between US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Gorbachev. In 2003, he was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by George W. Bush. In 2004, Vladimir Putin presented him with Russia's Order of Friendship. And in 2011, President Barack Obama presented him with the National Medal of the Arts.

Cliburn's public playing would become less and less frequent as the years past. In early 2013, it was announced that Cliburn had been diagnosed with bone cancer. He passed way from the disease on February 27, 2013. He was 79.

Prior to his death, Cliburn set up the Cliburn Foundation, an organization that hosts international piano competitions.

Upon his return to America in 1958, New York Mayor Robert F. Wagner said of Cliburn, "With his two hands, Van Cliburn struck a chord which has resounded around the world, raising our prestige with artists and music lovers everywhere."

On his passing, the head of Julliard, Veda Kaplinsky said of him, "In 1958, he proved to the world that music is a transcendental force that goes beyond political boundaries and cultural boundaries and unifies mankind."

And Robert Blocker, dean of the Yale School of Drama said, "He understood the role music could play in the lives of diverse people. He just saw music as a vehicle of hope. He lived that out, whether it was with [President] Carter or Khrushchev. I see him as being one of the world's great cultural leaders. The message he carried to presidents and to children was that music was important."

Throughout his acclaimed career, Van Cliburn would play and record a variety of magnificent performances. Certainly his million-selling, RCA released version of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto, No. 1 is an extraordinary recording and significant in its own way. But as good and as important as it is, it is Cliburn's actual victory-claiming performance of the same piece in Russia on April 11, 1958, that truly belongs on the National Recording Registry. For it is this recording of this live event, remarkably unreleased to the public until 2009, pregnant with anticipation and weighted with political significance, that catapulted Cliburn to the level of idolatry, and forevermore into the books of history.

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