

Van Cliburn, US pianist who achieved fame at Moscow competition, dead at 78

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Van Cliburn, the American pianist who died on Wednesday at the age of 78, achieved instant fame when he won the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958.

The Soviet public, highly literate musically, especially in the romantic repertory in which Cliburn excelled, was captivated by the young pianist. He was mobbed by fans. By the time of the finals, 1,500 jammed into the concert hall and thousands more crowded outside. Later accounts described the scene as a virtual riot, something akin to the adulation reserved for pop stars in the West (although undoubtedly with a mostly older crowd).

Cliburn's recital included the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1, with which the musician was forever to be associated. He concluded with Rachmaninoff's Third Concerto, another work in which he demonstrated his ability to perform Russian music more powerfully than many of the Russians. Legendary Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter reportedly called the young man a genius. Emil Gilels, who also sat on the jury in Moscow, went backstage to congratulate Cliburn. The jury joined in the long ovation following his performance.

The Moscow competition was not the beginning of the career for this brilliant young musician. He took lessons from his mother, Rildia Bee O'Bryan, a pianist who had trained in New York with the Russian-born pianist and conductor Arthur Friedheim (1859-1932), who was in turn a favorite pupil of Franz Liszt in the 1880s. Cliburn studied at Juilliard with Rosina Lhévinne (1880-1976), another famous teacher who had been born in Kiev and was steeped in the Russian romantic tradition.

Long before the Soviet audience heard the young man, he had shown great promise and impressed

important musical figures. Among the judges in the 1954 Leventritt competition, won by Cliburn, were conductor George Szell, pianist-conductor Leonard Bernstein and pianist Rudolf Serkin.

The Moscow competition, however, was very different from the Leventritt. It attracted enormous publicity, and came at a time that turned out to be a perfect opportunity for someone like Cliburn to reach an international audience and win overnight acclaim.

Though the late 1950s were years of a gradual thaw in the tensions between Moscow and Washington, the kind of international musical exchange and cooperation that Cliburn suddenly symbolized would have been unthinkable a few years earlier—or a few years later, for that matter, amid the tensions surrounding the Berlin Wall of 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The Stalinist leaders in Moscow had their own reasons to welcome Cliburn's victory in 1958. Here was an example of the "peaceful coexistence" which they promoted, a grand bargain with the capitalist world that would enable the Soviet bureaucracy to protect its own position against the working class. Nikita Khrushchev was reportedly consulted on whether the jury should award the prize to the American, and gave his approval.

The US media inevitably portrayed Cliburn's victory through the prism of the Cold War. *Time* magazine put Cliburn on its cover with the headline, "The Texan Who Conquered Russia." Even the obituaries of Cliburn today, 54 years later, perpetuate this image, headlining his passing as that of a "Cold War hero."

The pianist himself rejected efforts to portray his victory in national or political terms. "I was just so involved with the sweet and friendly [Russian] people who were so passionate about music," he later explained. In 2008, according to the obituary article in

the British *Telegraph*, he said, “I didn’t conquer anything. As a matter of fact, they conquered my heart.”

To many around the world, Cliburn’s victory was a triumph for classical music, and at the same time a small but heartfelt statement in opposition to the forces immortalized in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), the satire on warmongers made a few years later.

There was another lesson in the young pianist’s new prominence. His winning the Leventritt award was followed by appearances with such famous orchestras as those in Cleveland and Pittsburgh, but there was little public interest. In the Soviet Union, however, despite the awful crimes of Stalinism, the Russian Revolution had greatly expanded the audience for classical music and kept alive the musical traditions of the past.

Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who awarded the prize medal to Cliburn in 1958, was supposed to have commented later that it had taken the latter’s success in Moscow to awaken America to this great pianist in its midst.

Cliburn returned home to massive publicity. He appeared on Edward R. Murrow’s television program, “Person to Person.” His recording of the Tchaikovsky Concerto became the first million-selling classical record. He filled New York’s Madison Square Garden, something that would be almost unthinkable today. His income for the 1958-59 concert season was more than \$150,000, well over \$1 million in today’s terms.

At the same time, celebrity became a two-edged sword. Even as he helped to enlarge the audience for classical music, Cliburn found himself pressed to perform everywhere, usually in the same repertoire, and as a kind of symbol of America. Although he had a financially successful concert career for nearly 20 years, and also recorded concertos by Grieg, Schumann, MacDowell, Prokofiev and Chopin, his career began to decline seriously, and he wound up calling a halt to public performance in 1978 at 44, an age at which many pianists and other musicians are not even yet in the prime of their careers.

Cliburn called this an “intermission,” not a retirement, but when he came back to perform over a decade later, it was only fairly briefly. There were a number of instances in the 1990s when the pianist

faltered in performance.

The criticism of Cliburn centered on his failure to develop in new repertory, and a routinism and predictability in his playing, the loss of the expansive lyricism and power that had attracted such enthusiasm earlier.

Critic David Dubal, in the 2004 edition of his massive book *The Art of the Piano*, perceptively notes, about Cliburn’s withdrawal from public performance in the 1970s, “He must have been weary of being a hero, on the move for twenty years, playing the Tchaikovsky concerto again and again.”

In his last years the pianist received numerous honors, highest among them the Kennedy Center Honors in 2001. He continued to lend his name to the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, like the Tchaikovsky Competition a quadrennial event.

Dubal’s conclusion on Cliburn, written some years before the latter’s death, seems a fair one: “If, however, Cliburn never returns to regular concertizing, he has written one of the most spectacular pages in the history of his instrument, and his accomplishment and his legend will live on.”



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