In the face of anti-Russian venom, the Cliburn piano competition takes a principled stand

David Walsh
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The campaign of anti-Russian venom is reaching new heights. On a daily basis, actors, writers, historians, journalists and scientists release statements that seem intended to outdo each other in their unhinged character. A portion of the upper-middle class globally has succumbed to war fever of an intense and diseased variety. They have discovered the "heart of darkness," Vladimir Putin and his regime.

The proposed cancellation at the University of Milano-Bicocca of a course on the 19th century Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky generated such anger and ridicule that the institution was obliged to back down. On social media, the instructor of the course, writer Paolo Nori, commented that "Not only is being a living Russian wrong in Italy today, but also being a dead Russian, who was sentenced to death in 1849 because he read something forbidden."

Renowned Russian conductors, musicians and singers such as Valery Gergiev, Anna Netrebko, Alexander Malofeev and Denis Matsuev have already fallen victim to this foul campaign.

In the face of the relentless demonization, aimed at poisoning public opinion against the Russian people and facilitating the war drive of the US and NATO, the stance of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition (The Cliburn) in Fort Worth, Texas has a particularly principled character.

The first competition was held in 1962, four years after American pianist Van Cliburn's victory at the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in April 1958, a major event during the Cold War period.

The Cliburn released a statement March 3 in which it decried the Russian invasion of Ukraine as "reprehensible and heartbreaking" and expressed its firm stand against "this tyranny." The foundation went on to explain, however, that the "Russian-born pianists who have applied for the Sixteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition are not officials of their government, nor is their participation in the Cliburn state-sponsored." In the "vision of our namesake and inspiration, Van Cliburn, and our mandate to support young artists … the Russian-born pianists will be allowed to audition for the Cliburn Competition."

The press statement commented that Cliburn's victory in 1958 "inspired the world as a testament to the transcendence of art, even at the most tense of times between two superpowers." It cited the pianist's own observation that "the eternal verities inherent in classical music … remain a spiritual beacon for people all over the world."

The Cliburn explained that 15 of the 72 pianists invited to take part in screening auditions for the 2022 Cliburn Competition were Russian-born, and "eight of those currently reside in Moscow. These young, brilliant artists have worked their way through an intense and complicated situation to ensure they would be able … to compete on one of classical music's biggest stages."

The organization quotes a note sent by one of the Russian applicants: "I hope that the great positive impact Maestro Van Cliburn had on the course of the Cold War should be an excellent example for all the artists."

It remains to be seen what pressures will be brought to bear on The Cliburn to rescind its decision.

Van Cliburn's success at the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958 was quite an extraordinary occurrence.

Harvey Lavan "Van" Cliburn Jr. was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1934, the son of Rildia Bee O'Bryan and Harvey Lavan Cliburn Sr. His mother had the ambition of being a concert pianist, but was forced by her parents to give up the idea. She studied seriously in New York with Arthur Friedheim, Franz Liszt's foremost pupil and, later, his secretary. Van Cliburn began playing piano at the age of three. He eventually attended the Juilliard School and made his Carnegie Hall debut at 20.

Cliburn's burgeoning career coincided with changes in the international political and cultural situation, which included growing exchanges between the West and the Soviet Union. In October 1955, Emil Gilels became the first Soviet musician to visit the US since the Second World War. Nigel Cliff in *Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story—How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War* (2016), writes, "Gilels made his debut at Carnegie Hall with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy, Rachmaninoff's favorite conductor. As he played the inevitable Piano Concerto no. 1 by Tchaikovsky, the audience's mood transformed from uneasy to ecstatic."

Cliburn was in the Carnegie Hall audience. "Within weeks the Soviet violinist David Oistrakh followed, and astonished Americans with his virtuosic intensity," Cliff adds. In May 1957, Canadian pianist Glenn Gould made a highly successful concert tour of the USSR, becoming the first North American musician to play behind the "Iron Curtain."

The Soviet launch of Sputnik 1, the world's first artificial satellite, in October 1957 threw US authorities, accustomed to boasting about American industrial and technological superiority, into a crisis. The "Space Race" was on. The US government responded nervously with a variety of initiatives, including, in July 1958, the creation of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

The Tchaikovsky Competition in the spring of 1958 took place in a tense, heightened atmosphere.

The appearances of Gilels and Oistrakh in the US demonstrated the great importance and even reverence accorded to classical music and the arts generally in the USSR. As Cliff points out,

> The Soviet republics supported 503 permanent year-round theater companies, 314 middle schools of the arts, 48 higher schools, and 43 advanced conservatories and theatrical and art institutes, while the Ministry of Culture had direct charge of 900,000 arts workers. Many were employed in the famously tough system of music training that funneled children as young as seven to specialist music schools, where the best were prepared for eight years' further study at a conservatory.

The first Tchaikovsky Competition had astonishing artistic credentials. The organizing committee was headed by composer Dmitri Shostakovich. As for the judges, Cliff asserts, "they comprised perhaps the most formidable piano jury ever assembled. Alongside the sturdy Gilels and the lugubrious [Sviatoslav] Richter was their teacher, Heinrich Neuhaus; and Vladimir Ashkenazy's teacher, Lev Oborin. The Russian Dmitri Kabalevsky and the Englishman Sir Arthur Bliss represented composers, and the other judges came from Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Romania, and the USSR."

As the competition approached,

> The names of Shostakovich, Gilels, and Richter were everywhere. A national audience tuned in to a radio series called Heading Toward the Competition, which spotlighted the participants and their recordings, explained how the event would work, and interviewed leading Soviet musicians, who shared their hopes for its success. *Pravda* and *Izvestiya* devoted columns of print to the great event, running biographies of the contestants alongside their photographs: fifteen one day, fifteen the next.

Cliburn's performances of Russian concertos, Tchaikovsky No. 1, Rachmaninoff No. 3, received a rapturous response from the Moscow audiences. Lina Baranov, then a student at the Central School for Gifted Children in Moscow in 1958, recently told the *Los Angeles Times* that she had listened "to a dress rehearsal of Van Cliburn when he played Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3." She went on, "It was incredible. People were crying. One pianist said that his playing reminded him of Sergei Rachmaninoff. At that time, we never heard Rachmaninoff 3 in Russia. It was so beautiful, so inspiring."

Richter in particular insisted on Cliburn's superiority and gave him the highest marks in every round.

Cliff describes the atmosphere at the event and Cliburn's response:

> The competition press officers hovered around, interviewing the contestants and asking their views on the Soviet Union. Van diplomatically stuck to music. "I have walked where Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and other great musicians have walked," he dictated. "I am touched by the cordial reception that was given to me. It is a great pleasure to play for the Russians who are such fine lovers of music. The friendliness of the audience inspired me, and one felt as if one was playing better than usual. This is my first trip outside the United States, and I am very happy to be in the homeland of wonderful Russian composers for whose work I have great respect."

According to legend at least, when the judging was completed, government officials approached Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev apprehensively and told him that an American had played very well. "What do the others say about him? Is he the best?" Khrushchev reportedly asked. "Yes, he is the best." "In that case," the premier said, "give him the first prize."

Cliburn became instantly and enormously popular in the Soviet Union. Cliff describes the "hundreds of letters and boxes of pink floral telegrams" that accumulated in his Moscow hotel room, "some simply addressed, 'Conservatory, Vanya Kleeburn.' Many came from students: not only musicians but entire classes at the Faculty for History and Philology of the Ivanovo State Pedagogical Institute and the Faculty of Soil Science and Biology of Moscow State University, who signed themselves, 'Your friends forever.' Others came from a forestry engineer, a geographer, and a telegraph operator named Saida Nurmukhamedova, who asked Van, 'on behalf of all Soviet telegraph operators, to pass our friendly greetings to the American telegraph operators. Our telegraph operators will always be happy to hear your exceptional playing.' She added, 'When I have a son I shall definitely name him after you.'"

Cliburn's warm reception and his equally warm reaction to the Soviet public alarmed J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI and other US government officials. A secret cable from the State Department reported that certain of Cliburn's associates were concerned that he "has become quite laudatory of his reception and stay in Soviet Union. Under circumstances, they are particularly apprehensive as to what might happen when Cliburn first returns to US and meets press. They believe he is liable to make some very unwise statements if queried on political matters, about which he knows very little, particularly in view of his reported change in attitude. They speculate in this regard that Cliburn may have been 'approached' by Soviets."

Time magazine put him on their cover, as "The Texan Who Conquered Russia," and Cliburn was honored with a ticker-tape parade in New York City on May 28, 1958, the only time a classical musician has received such treatment. After the parade, at City Hall, Cliburn told the audience:

> I appreciate more than you will ever know that you are honoring me, but the thing that thrills me the most is that you are honoring classical music. Because I'm only one of many. I'm only a witness and a messenger. Because I believe so much in the beauty, the construction, the architecture invisible, the importance for all generations, for young people to come that it will help their minds, develop their attitudes, and give them values. That is why I'm so grateful that you have honored me in that spirit.

The responses of both Soviet citizens and Americans provided a more accurate picture of the actual state of feelings between the two populations. Despite the vigorous efforts of US propagandists, vicious anti-Russian hatred in the 1950s and 1960s was largely the preserve of the "lunatic fringe," the extreme right, the "John Birchers" and such. Now it has infected a significant section of the "respectable" middle class, grown wealthy on the basis of financial parasitism. These elements have discarded socially progressive views and opted for selfish race and gender politics. They have shifted far to the right and now feel no compunction about enthusing over the US and NATO war drive and portraying Ukrainian nationalists and fascists as courageous "democrats."