

Russians and Ukrainian among six finalists at Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

David Walsh
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The six finalists at the Sixteenth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition were announced June 12 by jury chair Marin Alsop from the stage at Bass Performance Hall in Fort Worth, Texas. The six are now vying for the top prize of a gold medal, \$100,000 in cash and the possibility of an international career.

The finalists are Dmytro Choni, 28, from Ukraine, Anna Geniushene, 31, and Ilya Shmukler, 27, from Russia, Uladzislau Khandohi, 20, from Belarus, Yunchan Lim, 18, from South Korea and Clayton Stephenson, 23, from the US.

In the semifinal round, 12 of the original 30 competitors performed both a 60-minute recital and a Mozart concerto with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. The final round is currently under way, during which the competitors will perform two concertos with the same orchestra. The winners of the gold, silver and bronze medals will be announced Saturday evening.

This year's edition of the prestigious quadrennial competition, first held in 1962, has become the focus of considerable attention because of the war in Ukraine and the Cliburn's decision to permit Russian pianists to participate. In the face of a flurry of announcements by various music and film events reporting a ban on Russian artists, the Fort Worth organizers stood their ground. They took the position that while the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine was "reprehensible and heartbreaking," the Russian-born pianists who had applied for the competition "are not officials of their government, nor is their participation in the Cliburn state-sponsored."

At the ceremony announcing the list of finalists, Cliburn board chairman Jeff King told the performers, "You have affirmed that we all have more in common than not, that we are all brothers and sisters together, and that we all share the same dreams." King went on, "Van Cliburn said, 'If you hold on to the beauty and inspiration and the clarity that is music, you will have an anchor and you will

not be swayed ...' Thank you for being who you are ... you bring the healing energy that is music to our world."

The first Cliburn competition was held four years after its namesake, American pianist Van Cliburn (1934–2013), triumphed at the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in April 1958, a significant cultural event during the Cold War period.

In April of this year, in a particularly hypocritical and dishonest action, the World Federation of International Music Competitions (WFIMC) expelled the Tchaikovsky competition, one of its most prestigious affiliates, from the 120-member body. Remarkably, the WFIMC claimed that "as an apolitical organization," it could not "support or have as a member, a competition financed and used as a promotional tool by the Russian regime." It could, however, as an allegedly "apolitical organization," line up with the US-NATO proxy war and the chauvinist, anti-Russian campaign spearheaded by the Biden administration and the US media in particular.

The Cliburn is a prominent WFIMC member. Needless to say, no American affiliate has been troubled by WFIMC sanctions, much less expulsion, during the past 30 years of unprovoked and illegal US-led wars, invasions and occupations, leading to the deaths of millions.

Fifteen of the original 30 competitors at this year's Cliburn event were Russian-born. Speaking of the group of six finalists, one commentator noted that it was a case of "back to the USSR," because four of the group were from former Soviet states.

In an interview with *Fort Worth* magazine, Moscow-born finalist Anna Geniushene observed that music was "an international language as the history of arts also confirms." Geniushene went on to note that "We all are the victims of the [present] situation, and sadly, we cannot stop the chaos; however, we might speak out and spread the word around. I would really like to share my music, and this remains to be my priority during any kind of

activities in the world.” Here she is playing Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 25 in the Semifinal Round.

Geniushene, born in 1991, made her recital debut just seven years later in the small hall of the Berlin Philharmonic. According to the Cliburn website, she has since “developed a diverse and versatile career as an artist: performances in major world venues such as the Town Hall in Leeds, National Concert Hall in Dublin, Museum of Arts in Tel Aviv, the Konzerthaus ‘Neue Welt,’ Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory, and Sala Greppi in Milan; a dedication to chamber music, including duo piano repertoire with her husband, Lukas Geniušas, and close collaboration with Quartetto di Cremona; and the creation of her own festival of collaborative music-making (NikoFest).”

A laureate of major international piano contests, Geniushene, who graduated from the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory in 2015 and completed her Master’s with Distinction and Advanced Diploma from the Royal Academy of Music (London) in 2018, “sees her participation in the Cliburn as a ‘dream,’ as an ‘opportunity to be part of a very friendly community, to find a new audience, and to challenge myself.’”

“As a Russian-born and Russian-taught pianist, I was raised in adoration of the Tchaikovsky Competition, the very central event of the country,” she told an interviewer. “I had a Soviet-printed book describing in details of the musical path of Van Cliburn and his further continuation of conquering the world as a top-ranked pianist.”

The sole Ukrainian finalist, the highly acclaimed Dmytro Choni, began playing piano in his native Kiev “when he was 4 years old. After a particularly meaningful performance at the age of 14, which he calls ‘a turning point,’ his lifelong journey of professional musicianship began.” He earned a bachelor’s degree from the Tchaikovsky National Music Academy of Ukraine under the guidance of Yuri Kot, then moved to Austria in 2015 to study with Milana Chernyavska at the Kunstuniversität Graz.

Choni has taken first prize at numerous international piano competitions, in Spain, the US, Germany, Italy and Argentina. Is it an accident that he uses the same word as Geniushene, calling the Cliburn “nothing else but my dream”? Choni’s website cites his comment, “Being successful for me means to continuously grow as a musician and as a person, and not to stop searching for the truth in music. In my opinion, the most important aspect would be to love the music with all your heart.”

According to *Fort Worth*, “Choni’s preference is not to

talk about the war or, at least, dwell on it. He has said in the past that his music has been a refuge from the turmoil in his mother country.” He told the magazine that “music can bring peace to people’s souls. It’s very valuable. ... I let my experience be reflected in the music I perform, when appropriate. ... Playing piano has always been a kind of therapy for me. Now it is especially relevant.” In this video, his semifinal performance, he plays Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 20.

Jacques Marquis, Cliburn president and CEO, told the magazine that the decision to invite the Russian pianists was inspired by the example of Van Cliburn himself. “Especially for us, we were founded by this man’s legacy who in 1958 won the Tchaikovsky in Moscow in the Cold War,” Marquis explained. “Van Cliburn himself brought people together through music. He was never talking about politics, but music; the love of music and how it can bring people all over the world together. Yes, we were born from this inspiration that music can bring people from all boundaries together, and we should not ban or discriminate on these premises.”

Predictably, the *New York Times* noted that while the Cliburn decision had been applauded in the art world, “the decision has alienated some Ukrainian activists and Texas residents. Some argued that the only way to put pressure on Moscow to end the invasion is to cut political, economic and cultural ties.” The *Times* spoke to the Rev. Pavlo Popov, pastor of a Ukrainian church in suburban Dallas, who argued that it was “a shame that the Cliburn is not paying attention to human suffering and public opinion.”

In reality, the comments by the various musicians and competition officials are probably closer to ordinary “public opinion” than those of the warmongers and Ukrainian nationalists. They demonstrate a general decency and humanity absent from the endless media barrage about the current war. The barrage may be having an effect the opposite of the one intended. While the geopolitical issues are not widely grasped, there is a deep distrust of White House and Pentagon propaganda, after decades of lies and disinformation.



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