

Renowned Pianist Van Cliburn Diagnosed With Cancer

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Cliburn performing in the Moscow Conservatory in 1958 during the first Tchaikovsky Competition, which he won.

FORT WORTH, Texas — Renowned classical pianist Van Cliburn has been diagnosed with advanced bone cancer and is resting comfortably at his Texas home, his publicist said.

The 78-year-old Cliburn is under excellent care and his spirits are high, said longtime friend and publicist Mary Lou Falcone.

Cliburn skyrocketed to fame in 1958 when he won the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow at age 23. He triumphantly returned to a New York ticker tape parade, the only one ever for a classical musician, and a Time magazine cover proclaimed him "The Texan Who Conquered Russia."

In the years that followed, Cliburn's popularity soared, and the young man from the small east Texas town of Kilgore sold out concerts, broke record sales, caused riots when spotted in public and even prompted an Elvis Presley fan club to change its name to his.

But he tired of years of performing mainly the same pieces that made him famous — such as Tchaikovsky's "Piano Concerto No. 1," which had sealed his Moscow win — and took a sabbatical in 1978, feeling emotionally drained from nonstop touring. Cliburn later moved from New York to Fort Worth, where he currently lives and where he remained active in the arts and social scenes. He began playing publicly again in the late 1980s.

Until only recently, Cliburn practiced daily and performed limited engagements.

He has performed for every U.S. president since Harry Truman, and for years has devoted his time to the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Founded by Fort Worth music teachers in 1962, it's held every four years and is considered among the world's premier piano competitions.

Cliburn won a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004, and was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2003.

He was already an accomplished pianist before winning the 1958 competition in Moscow. He started taking piano lessons from his mother at age 3, then made his debut with the Houston Symphony Orchestra at age 12. He studied at Juilliard, won the famed Leventritt Competition and performed with several orchestras across the country — including the New York Philharmonic.

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