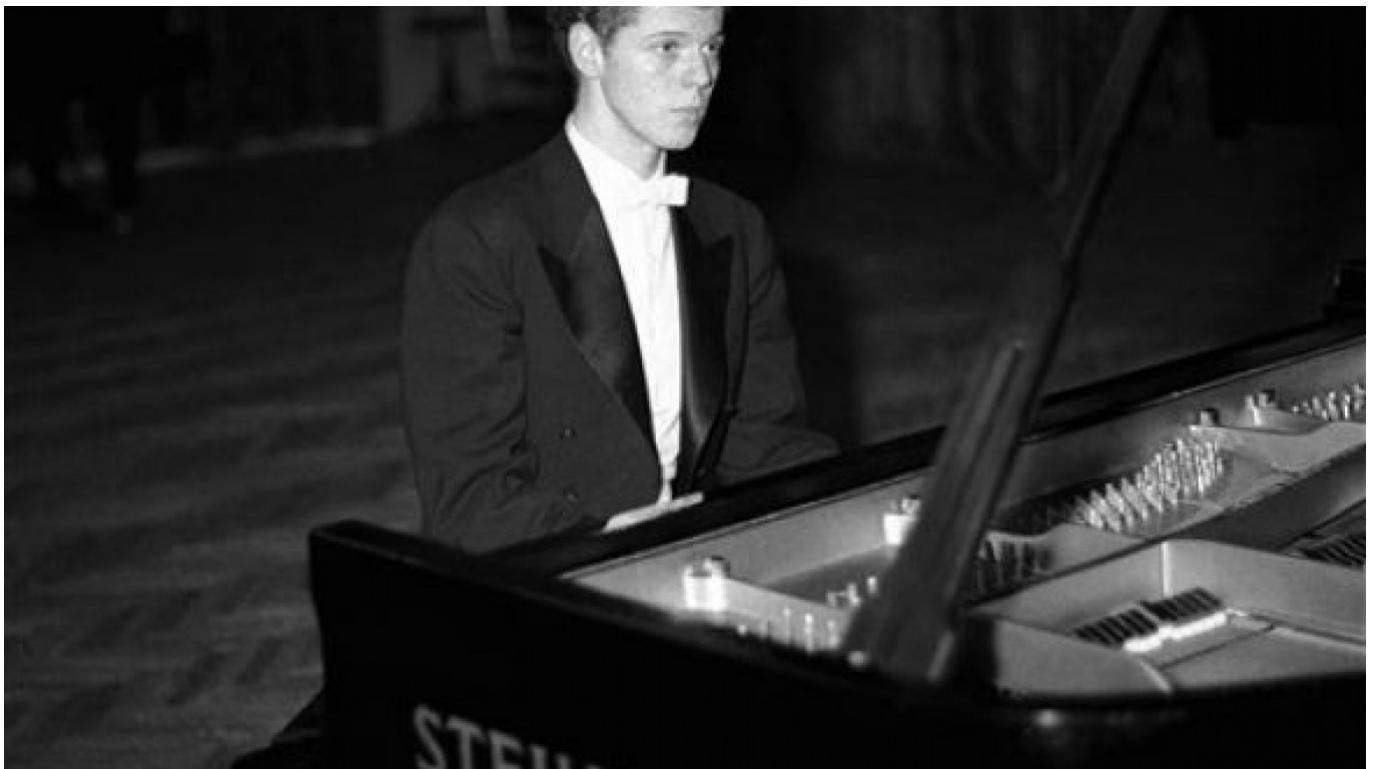


Van Cliburn, Pianist and Cold War Hero, Dies at 78

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Cliburn performing in the final round of the 1958 Tchaikovsky competition.

Video: Van Cliburn playing Tchaikovsky's "Piano Concerto No.1" during a return visit to Moscow in 1962.

FORT WORTH, Texas — For a time in Cold War America, Van Cliburn had all the trappings of a rock star: sold-out concerts, adoring, out-of-control fans and a name recognized worldwide. He even got a ticker-tape parade in New York City.

And he did it all with only a piano and some Tchaikovsky concertos.

The celebrated pianist played for every American president since Harry Truman, plus royalty and heads of state around the world. But he is best remembered for winning a 1958 piano competition in Moscow that helped thaw the icy rivalry between the United States and the

Soviet Union.

Cliburn, who died Wednesday at 78 after fighting bone cancer, was "a great humanitarian and a brilliant musician whose light will continue to shine through his extraordinary legacy," said his publicist and longtime friend Mary Lou Falcone. "He will be missed by all who knew and admired him, and by countless people he never met."

The young man from the small east Texas town of Kilgore was a baby-faced 23-year-old when he won the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow just six months after the Soviets' launch of Sputnik embarrassed the U.S. and inaugurated the space race.

Cliburn returned to a hero's welcome and the ticker-tape parade — the first ever for a classical musician. A Time magazine cover proclaimed him "The Texan Who Conquered Russia."

The win also showed the power of the arts, creating unity despite the tension between the superpowers. Music-loving Soviets clamored to see him perform. Premier Nikita Khrushchev reportedly gave the go-ahead for the judges to honor a foreigner: "Is Cliburn the best? Then give him first prize."

In the years that followed, Cliburn's popularity soared. He sold out concerts and caused riots when he was spotted in public. His fame even prompted an Elvis Presley fan club to change its name to his. His recording of the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 with Russian conductor Kirill Kondrashin became the first classical album to reach platinum status.

Time magazine's 1958 cover story quoted a friend as saying Cliburn could become "the first man in history to be a Horowitz, Liberace and Presley all rolled into one."

Russian pianist Denis Matsuev, who won the Tchaikovsky competition in 1998 at the age of 23, the same age as Cliburn, said Cliburn's "romantic style captured the hearts of Soviet audience."

"Everyone was in love with him," Matsuev said. "And he loved the Soviet Union, Russia and the Russian public."

Matsuev, who knew Cliburn personally, described him as an "incredibly delicate, kind and gentle man who dedicated his entire life to art."

He also used his skill and fame to help other young musicians through the Van Cliburn International Music Competition, held every four years. Created in 1962 by a group of Fort Worth teachers and citizens, it remains among the top showcases for the world's best pianists.

"Since we know that classical music is timeless and everlasting, it is precisely the eternal verities inherent in classical music that remain a spiritual beacon for people all over the world," Cliburn once said.

President George W. Bush presented Cliburn with the Presidential Medal of Freedom — the nation's highest civilian honor — in 2003. The following year, he received the Order of Friendship of the Russian Federation from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"I still have lots of friends in Russia," Cliburn said at the time. "It's always a great pleasure to talk to older people in Russia, to hear their anecdotes."

After the death of his father in 1974, Cliburn announced he would soon retire to spend more time with his ailing mother. He stopped touring in 1978.

Among other things, touring robbed him of the chance to enjoy opera and other musical performances.

"I said to myself, 'Life is too short.' I was missing so much," he told *The New York Times* in 2008. After winning the competition, "it was thrilling to be wanted. But it was pressure, too."

Cliburn emerged from his sabbatical in 1987, when he played at a state dinner at the White House during the historic visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev leapt from his seat to give the pianist a bear-hug and kisses on the cheeks. Nancy Reagan, then the first lady, has called that night one of the greatest moments of her husband's presidency.

"After not playing in public for many years, he agreed to make an exception for this occasion, and his beautiful music brought the whole room to tears," Reagan said in a statement Wednesday, adding that "the world has lost a true treasure."

Cliburn was born Harvey Lavan Cliburn Jr. on July 12, 1934, in Shreveport, La., the son of oilman Harvey Cliburn Sr. and Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn. At age 3, he began studying piano with his mother, herself an accomplished pianist who had studied with a pupil of the great 19th century Hungarian pianist Franz Liszt.

The family moved back to Kilgore within a few years of his birth.

Cliburn won his first Texas competition when he was 12, and two years later he played in Carnegie Hall as the winner of the National Music Festival Award.

At 17, Cliburn attended the Juilliard School in New York, where fellow students marveled at his marathon practice sessions that stretched until 3 a.m. He studied under the famed Russian-born pianist Rosina Lhevinne.

Between 1952 and 1958, he won all but one competition he entered, including the G.B. Dealey Award from the Dallas Symphony, the Kosciusko Foundation Chopin Scholarship and the prestigious Leventritt. By age 20, he had played with the New York Philharmonic and the symphonies of most major cities.

Cliburn's career seemed ready to take off until his name came up for the draft. He had to cancel all shows but was eventually excused from duty due to chronic nosebleeds.

Over the next few years, Cliburn's international popularity continued as he recorded pieces ranging from Mozart to a concerto by American Edward McDowell. Still, having been trained by some of the best Russian teachers in the world, Cliburn's heart was Russian, with the Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff concertos.

After 1990, Cliburn toured Japan numerous times and performed throughout the United

States. He was in the midst of a 16-city U.S. tour in 1994 when his mother died at age 97.

Cliburn, who made his home in Fort Worth, endowed scholarships at many schools, including Juilliard, which gave him an honorary doctorate, and the Moscow and Leningrad conservatories. In December 2001, he was presented with the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors Medallion at the televised tribute held in Washington.

He practiced daily and performed limited engagements until only recently. His last public appearance came in September at the 50th anniversary of the prestigious piano competition bearing his name.

Speaking to the audience in Fort Worth, he saluted the many past contestants, the orchestra and the city: "Never forget: I love you all from the bottom of my heart, forever." The audience responded with a roaring standing ovation.

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