

Van Cliburn Remembered as Gifted Pianist

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Bush, Perry, and their wives attending the memorial service on Sunday.

FORT WORTH, Texas — Legendary pianist Van Cliburn was remembered Sunday as a gifted musician who transcended the boundaries of politics and art by easing tensions during the Cold War and introducing classical music to millions.

About 1,400 people attended a memorial service for Cliburn, who died Wednesday at age 78 after fighting bone cancer. As the service began, the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra accompanied a choir, while pallbearers carried his flower-covered coffin into a Fort Worth church.

Several speakers referred to what made Cliburn famous: winning the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958, when he was just 23. At the height of the Cold War, the win by the pianist, who grew up in Texas, helped thaw the icy rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

"Over the course of many years, during the most difficult historical times, the art of Van Cliburn brought together people from different countries, different continents and united them," Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a statement that was read during the service. "We shall always remember Van Cliburn as a true and sincere friend of the Russian people."

Former President George W. Bush told mourners that Soviets at the competition didn't find the expected stereotypical Texas cowboy but a gracious, humble young man who was "beloved, even by the enemy." Cliburn continued to spread peace and love through his music, Bush said.

"Members of the presidents' club could have taken a lesson from him in diplomacy," said Bush, who presented Cliburn with the Presidential Medal of Freedom the nation's highest civilian honor in 2003.

After the Moscow win, Cliburn returned to a hero's welcome and a ticker-tape parade in New York City — the first ever for a classical musician. A Time magazine cover proclaimed him "The texan who conquered Russia." Cliburn's popularity soared, and he sold out concerts and caused riots when he was spotted in public.

Cliburn played for every U.S. president from Dwight D. Eisenhower to Barack Obama, plus royalty and heads of state worldwide.

"I am confident that the enduring beauty of his art will sustain his legendary status for years to come," Obama said in a statement that was read during the service.

Cliburn 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. The next competition, to be held in May and June, is being dedicated to Cliburn's memory.

Texas Governor Rick Perry said Cliburn helped keep the state at the center of the arts, "and in that way, Van lives on."

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

The family moved back to the east Texas town of 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. Between 1952 and 1958, he won all but one competition he entered.

Despite his phenomenal success over five decades, Cliburn remained humble and gracious, friends said.

The Rev. Brent Beasley said Cliburn gave beauty back to God and to the world, "and we are

profoundly grateful.

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