



Cliburn, Van (1934-2013)

by Linda Rapp

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The young American pianist Van Cliburn gained sudden worldwide fame in 1958, when, at the height of the Cold War, he won the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. Critics praised his technique and virtuosity, and Americans hailed him as a hero.

Following his triumph in Moscow, Cliburn embarked on an ambitious performing and recording career that garnered numerous awards and brought him international acclaim. In 1962 he founded a quadrennial International Piano Competition that bears his name. He retired from the stage in 1978, but resumed limited concert appearances in 1989.

Harvey Lavan Cliburn, Jr. was born on July 12, 1934, in Shreveport, Louisiana, where his father, Harvey Lavan Cliburn, was working as a purchase and sales representative for an oil company. His mother, Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn, was a piano teacher. She was to exert a major influence on the life and career of her only child.

Rildia Bee Cliburn was a serious and talented pianist. She attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and then the New York School of Musical Art, where she studied with Arthur Friedheim, who had been a pupil of Franz Liszt. The playing style that she learned and in turn taught to her son reflected the musical trends of the late nineteenth century.

Mrs. Cliburn hoped to be a concert pianist, but her parents considered such a career inappropriate for a woman, so she went home to Texas and began giving piano lessons.

Van Cliburn started studying piano with her when he was three years old. By the age of four he was performing with a children's church group.

In 1941 the Cliburn family moved to Kilgore, Texas. Cliburn performed at various venues around the area, earning a reputation as a prodigy. At twelve he played Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto in B-flat Minor* with the Houston Symphony Orchestra.

Cliburn was taught principally by his mother at their home in Kilgore, Texas, though she periodically took him to New York to attend master classes at Juilliard. He was offered a scholarship to the school's preparatory division, but he rejected the offer. He refused to study with anyone but his mother.

However, Cliburn's adolescence in Kilgore was not happy. By 16 he had shot up to a height of 6 feet 4 inches. Excruciatingly self-conscious, in high school he was excused from athletics out of fear that he might injure his hands. He later recalled his adolescence outside the family as "a living hell," a description that suggests that he was subject to bullying.

Following his high school graduation, Cliburn moved to New York to study piano performance at Juilliard.



Van Cliburn in 2004.
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Anthony Thomassini writes that "As a young man, Mr. Cliburn was briefly linked romantically with a soprano classmate from Juilliard. But even then he was living a discreet homosexual life. His discretion was relaxed considerably in 1966 when, at 32, he met Thomas E. Zaremba, who was 19."

At the Juilliard School Cliburn studied with Rosina Lhévinne. She brought a Russian romanticism to his style, which was admirably suited to the repertoire of pieces that he favored.

Cliburn's talent garnered him numerous awards. He won the Dealey Award and the Kosciuszko Foundation's Chopin prize in 1952 and the Juilliard concerto competition the next year. In 1954 he won the Roeder Award and the Edgar M. Leventritt Foundation Award, the latter bringing him the opportunity to play with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. After graduating with honors later that year, Cliburn began touring as a solo performer.

The turning point in Cliburn's life came in 1958, when he won the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition. His performance awed critics. Composer Aram Khachaturian declared Cliburn's rendition of Rachmaninoff's *Third Piano Concerto* better than Rachmaninoff's.

The response of the American public to Cliburn's triumph was based at least as much on politics as on aesthetics. Having been beaten into space when the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, Americans were eager for a victory of their own. Cliburn's success in Moscow gave them not only that but a classic American hero to boot. Tall, boyishly handsome, accomplished and charming yet modest, Cliburn was lionized by the press and embraced by the public.

Distrust between the superpowers was such that there were persistent rumors that Soviet officials had tried to pressure the judges to give the prize to a Russian, but that pianist Sviatoslav Richter had insisted that it go, deservedly, to Cliburn, and that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev himself had ratified the decision.

Cliburn was given a ticker-tape parade in New York upon his return from the competition and appeared on television shows such as *Person to Person*, *What's My Line?* and *The Tonight Show*. His recording of Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto* shared the top of the LP charts with Johnny Mathis's *Greatest Hits* album and the soundtrack from *South Pacific*. It became the first classical music album to sell a million copies within two years.

Cliburn was much in demand on the concert tour. He gave almost one hundred performances a year. His appearances in 1960 included a tour of the Soviet Union, where he was an audience favorite.

By the mid-1960s, however, the adulatory reviews for Cliburn were becoming mixed. Critics complained that he had not expanded his repertoire much beyond the works that had brought him the Tchaikovsky prize and showed little interest in doing so. Although Cliburn's repertoire was in fact wider than such comments suggested, it is true that the core of his program changed little over time.

By the beginning of the 1970s Cliburn's grueling concert schedule had taken a toll on him. His playing had become erratic, and critics continued to harp on his lack of musical growth. In 1974 Cliburn announced that after completing the concerts to which he was then committed, he would take a respite from the stage. After September 1978 he did not perform publicly until 1989, when he began accepting a limited number of concert dates.

Cliburn retired to a lavish house in Fort Worth, Texas, and became prominent on the local music scene. Among the projects to which he devoted his time was the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which he founded in 1962 and which is held quadrennially in Fort Worth.

In 1996 Thomas Zaremba filed a palimony suit against Cliburn, claiming that because of "an oral and/or implied partnership agreement," he was entitled to a share of Cliburn's income and property. Zaremba said

that he had assisted in the management of Cliburn's career and finances as well as performing domestic services such as helping Cliburn care for his aged mother.

Zaremba further alleged that Cliburn may have exposed him to AIDS during their seventeen-year relationship, which lasted until around the end of 1994, after which Zaremba moved to Center Line, Michigan, where he found work as a mortician.

Cliburn called the accusations "salacious" but otherwise had little to say about the case. Indeed, though always described as gracious and polite, Cliburn was known to be notoriously difficult to interview. Music insiders had long been aware of his homosexuality, and he and Zaremba had appeared together at public functions in Fort Worth, but in Cliburn's thirty-plus years as a celebrity, the press had never linked him romantically with anyone.

The public's image of him was still that of the All-American Boy--he seemed almost frozen in time at the moment of his victory in Moscow. He lived with his mother until her death at 97, was a lifelong Baptist and a regular church-goer, did not drink or smoke, and began his concerts with *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Zaremba's lawsuit was eventually dismissed because of the lack of a written agreement, which is required under Texas law.

In December 2001 Cliburn was among the artists feted at the Kennedy Center Honors. National security adviser Condoleezza Rice, herself a pianist, praised Cliburn's "grace and lyricism" and "the power of his music to build bridges across the cultural and political divide."

Cliburn was a long-time member of Fort Worth's Broadway Baptist Church to which he donated one of the largest organs in the United States, the Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn Organ, named in honor of the pianist's beloved mother.

In 2008, the Broadway Baptist Church was roiled by controversy when it decided to include photos of gay and lesbian couples in its church directory. During the controversy, which was finally settled when the church was expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention for welcoming gay and lesbian couples into full membership, Cliburn was frequently mentioned as a gay member of the congregation.

Cliburn died on February 27, 2013 at his home in Fort Worth, Texas of complications from bone cancer. He was survived by his partner, Thomas E. Smith.

The informative obituary by Thomassini in the *New York Times* details the triumphs and difficulties of Cliburn's career. It describes him as "a naturally gifted pianist whose enormous hands had an uncommonly wide span. He developed a commanding technique, cultivated an exceptionally warm tone and manifested deep musical sensitivity. At its best his playing had a surging Romantic fervor, but one leavened by an unsentimental restraint that seemed peculiarly American."

Thomassini contends that although the Tchaikovsky competition enabled Cliburn's breakthrough as an artist, "it also turned out to be his undoing" because "his growth was stalled by his early success." Thomassini repeatedly alleges that Cliburn failed to fulfill his potential. In contrast, the comments from readers that the obituary elicited tell a story of a man whose talent deeply touched many.

Cliburn is remembered as a beloved artist who was kind and generous to others. He also leaves an impressive discography, including especially live recordings of his concert performances of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff from the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as studio recordings of Beethoven, Chopin, and Brahms, among many other composers. His legacy also includes the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which is held quadrennially in Fort Worth.

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