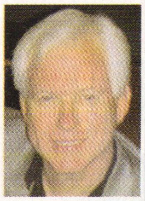
The Van Cliburn I Know

by John Salmon

Growing up in Fort Worth, Texas, as an aspiring concert pianist, it was impossible for me to escape the long shadow of Van Cliburn. I was born in 1954, started piano lessons in 1960 and, from 1973–78, attended Texas Christian University, home of the Van Cliburn Competition. I heard Cliburn in recital several times in Fort Worth, and my family hosted competitors in 1966, 1973 and 1977. My father, a CPA by trade, was auditor for the jury in 1973 and 1977. And, while I did give a recital once for the Van Cliburn Foundation, ca. 1976, I did not survive the "pre-screening" audition for the 1977 and 1981 competitions. I was both animated by, yet held in the psychological grips of, the Van Cliburn Competition. I have a clear recollection of a photograph of my childhood friend and rival Meade Crane, piano prodigy and local star, sitting in Cliburn's lap, around 1961. Success would be Crane's, I remember thinking. (Crane did make it, known nowadays as one of Seattle's most original chamber musicians.)

***John Salmon**, pianist, is on the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.*



Another vivid memory was of a Cliburn Competition party in 1969, co-hosted by my mother at a neighbor's house, attended by Cliburn himself, Radu Lupu, Cristina Ortiz (who won the gold medal that year) and other luminaries. I was 14 at the time, versatile in both classical and jazz and had been asked to entertain the group. When I started to play "Girl From Ipanema," the Brazilian Ortiz came to the piano and started singing the lyrics (in Portuguese, of course), with Cliburn, all 6-foot-4-inches of him, standing by my side, delighted by the performance. I remember asking Cliburn if he wanted to play something (my natural audacity augmented by my youth), to which he courteously replied, "No, John, I haven't practiced in two weeks."

I left Fort Worth in 1978 to pursue my pianistic dream elsewhere, without the Cliburn Competition's sanction. In that same year, Cliburn began an approximately nine-year sabbatical. In 1985, he moved to Fort Worth, where he attended (and still attends) my parents' church, Broadway Baptist, whose spectacular organ is named after his mother.

I now interpret in a literary way, the 1978 coincidence of his retirement with my own pianistic independence, as if one had caused the other. (I am nothing if not hyperbolic in my old age.)

The truth is, of course, that Cliburn probably does not know me from Adam. And, in the roughly 45 years since the photo was snapped of Crane sitting in Cliburn's lap; in the 37 years since he stood over me while I accompanied Ms. Ortiz; and in the 25 years since I was last eliminated from the competition…I seem to have carved out something of a pianistic career for myself, and made peace with Cliburn's imposing shadow.

Indeed, I am delighted by Cliburn's appearance for the MTNA conference attendees in March 2006. It will be a kind of "full circle" feeling for me…a fellow Texan, 20 years older than I, who practically reinvented the profession of "concert pianist," holding forth in the state's capital (and home to the University of Texas at Austin, another alma mater of mine) on his life in music. My life is forever intertwined with Cliburn's. (My mother recently told me another semi-trivial link: in the early 1930s, my mother's aunt sang at a wedding in Henrietta, Texas, accompanied by Rildia Bee, Cliburn's mother.)

For those whose lives have not been so dominated by or closely stitched to Cliburn's, the following sketch may fill in some blanks.

Rildia Bee and Rosina

Cliburn's first piano teacher was his mother, Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn, who herself had studied with Arthur Friedheim, a pupil of Liszt's. She was, without a doubt, Cliburn's most important pianistic influence. As Cliburn later recalled, "From age 3, she gave me a piano lesson every day of my life. Every single day (until age 17)." The intensity of their relationship—son and pupil, mother and teacher, 24/7—is virtually unimaginable nowadays. Patience, dedication and forbearance were obviously the pillars, together with talent and sweat, on which this amazing, perhaps unparalleled, pianistic background was built.

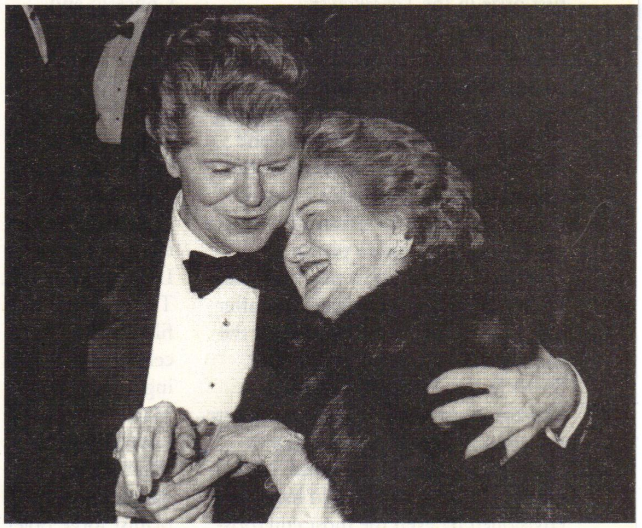
Rildia Bee imparted the basics of the virtuoso's trade, including, in Van Cliburn's words, "scale, scales and scales, and playing them with a beautiful legato." She emphasized the human voice, playing deep into the keys and creating a cantabile sound. More than once during piano lessons with Cliburn, and perhaps even more often with other students, she admonished, "Don't bang, don't bang."

The repertoire was grounded in the canon—Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, Liszt—with Rachmaninoff being the main 20th-century composer. Cliburn, reminiscing about this literature, commented, "So, essentially, it was the romantic school, with a lot of the classics but not a lot of contemporary, which, frankly, I didn't miss at all." Cliburn's later repertoire reveals this background and these predilections, venturing into more modern literature only sporadically, most notably with Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto and Sixth Piano Sonata and the Barber Piano Sonata, Op. 26.

So, by the time the 17-year-old Cliburn got to Juilliard and Rosina Lhevinne in 1951, he was practically a fully formed pianist. It seems to have been a perfect match—Cliburn with his grandly romantic, yet warmly Texan heritage, and Madame Lhevinne, whose husband was famed superpianist Josef Lhevinne, with her Russian discipline and links to the virtuoso tradition. Like Rildia Bee, Lhevinne wanted her students to play with a full, singing sound without tension or percussive attacks. Interpretively, she was very instinctual, relying on a student's inner charisma and conviction to convey the musical message. She corrected only when necessary.

One imagines that, to Cliburn anyway, Lhevinne was more cheerleader than instructor, more muse than music teacher. After all, Lhevinne—who would notoriously call her students at 8:00 A.M. with the foreboding question, "Why arrrn't you prrracticing?"— hardly needed to instill diligence in Cliburn, who had practiced hours every day of his life. The chemistry was, evidently, just right. Under her guidance, from 1951 to 1954, Cliburn won several important competitions, including the G.B. Dealey Award in 1952, yielding him a performance with the Dallas Symphony; the Kosciuszko Chopin Scholarship, also in 1952; and, in 1954, the Leventritt Award.

Cumulatively, these awards catapulted Cliburn to the forefront of America's young pianists. He was on the roster of Columbia Artists Management, and played in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic. Lhevinne's role was surely as much that of professional advisor as piano teacher.



Van Cliburn and his mother Rildia Bee O'Bryan Cliburn.

"American Sputnik"

Cliburn's career shot into the stratosphere in 1958, after winning the Tchaikowsky Competition. To appreciate the depth of Cliburn's international impact, one must recall the intensity of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War. Both countries were focused on space exploration, aware of the implications for possible missile attacks. With the successful launch of Sputnik I on October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union beat the United States in the "space race" and gained worldwide attention. This artificial satellite, about the size of a basketball, took less than two hours to orbit the Earth, but the effect was huge and longlasting.

The world was stunned into thinking that the Soviet Union dominated all technology, including nuclear, and the United States felt particularly vulnerable. Things got even hotter with the November 3, 1957, flight of Sputnik II, which carried a dog. Even though the United States countered on January 31, 1958, with the successful launch of Explorer I, the United States was still threatened by its perceived enemy.

So, when Cliburn was awarded the first prize in the Tchaikowsky Competition, his win attained extraordinary, extramusical meaning. Here was an American who had created a sensation among Russian audiences, playing the Tchaikowsky First Concerto and Rachmaninoff Third Concerto in the Great Hall of the venerable Moscow Conservatory; an American who had made the great Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter cry; a tall, lanky, boyish and charming American who, after the competition, was embraced by the short, stout, weathered and austere Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev. Photographers were on hand to capture this unlikely image, which was sent immediately around the world. No greater publicity stunt could have been envisioned by even the most enterprising New York agent.

It helped, of course, that Cliburn was, in Richter's words, "a genius," an opinion shared by such heavyweights as Emil Gilels and Heinrich Neuhaus. Without Cliburn's earthshaking talent, no artistic, and hence no political, sensation would have followed. So, while the Soviets beat the United States into space, Van Cliburn, a quintessential American, beat the Soviets in their own hometown. Radio Moscow called him "the American Sputnik, developed in secret."

Ticker-Tape Parade

Nowadays it may be difficult to imagine just how celebrated Cliburn became upon his return to the United States on May 16, 1958. Having captured the first prize in the Tchaikowsky Competition in mid-April 1958, and then touring for a month through the Soviet Union (with concerts in Leningrad, Riga, Kiev and Minsk), his fame in that part of the world was secure. But the acclaim he received in the United States, almost from the moment his plane touched down Friday morning, May 16, 1958, was truly unprecedented in the history of classical pianists.

First, there was his May 19 concert at Carnegie Hall, at which he played the Tchaikowsky B-flat Minor Concerto and Rachmaninoff D Minor Concerto (with three encores: Rachmaninoff Etude Tableau, the fugue from the Barber Sonata and the Schumann-Liszt "Widmung"). The audience was filled with celebrities, including actress Mary Martin, Princess Irina Volkonsky (Rachmaninoff's daughter) and pianist Jorge Bolet.

The next day, May 20, 1958, Cliburn was given a ticker-tape parade through downtown Manhattan. At a luncheon that day, composer Richard Rodgers and Juilliard President William Schuman gave speeches. Meanwhile, Cliburn had appeared as the cover story on the May 19, 1958 issue of *Time* magazine. In our present media-saturated age, one may not appreciate the enormity of this exposure, but in 1958, it broke the mold for a classical musician's publicity. A television appearance May 25 on *The Tonight Show* (on which jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong also appeared) sealed Cliburn's celebrity status and helped reinvigorate the entire classical music industry. By August 1958, his recording of the Tchaikowsky First Concerto had sold 300,000 copies—off the map for an industry that considered a sale of 5,000 LPs (by Heifetz, Rubinstein or Landowska) successful. Since then, that recording has sold more than 3 million copies, making it the most successful classical recording ever.

It is safe to say that no classical pianist ever has made such a splash or changed the profession so deeply. After Cliburn's success, according to Leon Fleisher, every notable pianist was able to command a higher fee. Even Horowitz and Rubinstein. Almost overnight, there was a renewed validation of the classical pianist's role in society.

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The Van Cliburn Competition

In retrospect, it seems inevitable that a musician of his expansive talent and generous disposition would have had a piano competition named after him. And not just any piano competition, but one that, by consensus, turned out to be the premier competition of the world, offering more prizes and opportunities to its victors than any competition in the history of piano contests.

True, when Irl Allison announced, at a November 30, 1958 dinner at the Fort Worth Piano Teachers' Forum in honor of Rildia Bee, that he wished to establish a piano competition in Cliburn's honor, no one could have guessed what it would turn into. But Allison's offer of $10,000 in start-up costs—enough money in 1958 to buy a small house—certainly set the stage for "big things." As Cliburn later mused, "Texans won't do it unless they can do it right."

The first competition was launched in 1962, crowning Ralph Votapek with the gold medal and giving him 50 concerts the first year. As a quadrennial event, the next competition was held in 1966, with Lupu garnering first prize. Lupu's career started then and there, though his 1969 victory at Leeds didn't hurt, and Lupu remains one of the Cliburn's most stellar laureates.

But the list of Cliburn Competition participants alone reads like a who's who of present-day virtuosi—Christopher O'Riley (5th prize, 1981), Vladimir Viardo (1st prize, 1973), Jon Nakamatsu (1st prize, 1997), Ian Hobson (5th prize, 1977), Jose Feghali (1st prize, 1985) and many more.

Van the Man

What is Van Cliburn like as a person? Those who know him cite, above all, his warmth and generosity. He talks to fans with kindness and sincerity, often long after a concert has ended. He has given large sums of money to many organizations—The Juilliard School, the Dallas Symphony, Baylor University and the competition that bears his name, to name a few—and, when in Russia, has often donated the proceeds of his concert fees to various Russian cultural organizations.

He is a devoted Southern Baptist who, soon after arriving in New York to study at Juilliard in 1951, joined the Calvary Baptist Church on West 57th; nowadays, as noted earlier, he attends Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth. His Baptist heritage extends to a maternal great-grandfather who was a pastor to Sam Houston, the most important 19th-century leader in Texas, and who was founder of the First Baptist Church and Waco University, which consolidated in 1886 to become Baylor University.

He is a collector of antiques and keepsakes, every corner of his Fort Worth home filled with a rare artifact or precious memento. When he went to Moscow in 1958 for the competition, he took three suitcases with him. Upon his return to the United States, some eight weeks later, he had 17 suitcases filled with gifts.

He is a perfectionist, as chronicled by recording engineers like Jack Somer, who helped him record the LP *My Favorite Chopin* over a 14-year period, and RCA producer John Pfeiffer, who had to browbeat Cliburn into releasing his 1958 live recording of the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto, now considered one of the definitive recordings of the work.

Cliburn is a night owl, often bidding adieu to his guests as neighbors take their morning walks. Once, in his hometown of Kilgore, Texas, after a 1989 concert that did not end until 11:00 P.M., he went to the First Presbyterian Church to hear a spontaneous organ concert by one of his friends, later that morning (6:00 A.M.?) giving a live television interview for *Good Morning, America.*

He loves opera, almost more than life itself. As an 11-year-old, Cliburn went door-to-door in Kilgore, Texas, selling memberships to the Kilgore Community Concert series, as a fundraiser to bring opera star Risë Stevens to town. He grew up listening to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, and there is hardly an opera house he hasn't visited or an opera star he doesn't know. He introduced Placido Domingo, a longtime friend, to Frank Sinatra; Domingo and Sinatra then became fast friends themselves.

He loves to party. There's the time in 1988 Cliburn and his mother invited Mr. and Mrs. Vladimir Horowitz to dinner at New York's famous restaurant La Côte Basque. Horowitz was a notoriously finicky eater, existing, normally, on only filet of sole and asparagus. But that night they ordered everything on the menu and stayed for hours. One imagines Cliburn as a lively raconteur with a puckish sense of humor. As a teenager, he would laugh so hard, he cried—as the time an old man at church sneezed and lost his dentures provoking an uncontrollable outburst from Cliburn, or the time he played Lazarus in a high-school play, giggling throughout the most somber of scenes.

Conclusion

For those whose curiosity has been piqued, several sources (used in the preparation of this article and gratefully recognized) are recommended. First and foremost, Howard Reich's biography (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993) is a rich, exhaustively documented traversal of Cliburn's life through about 1989. *The Van Cliburn Legend* by Abram Chasins (Doubleday & Co., 1959) is a witty, readable account of the early days, zeroing in on the sensation after Moscow. Through image and sound, two DVDs make Cliburn's charisma palpable: the 1966 documentary by Henry Jaffe, *Van Cliburn: A Portrait from the Bell Telephone Hour (1966)*; and the 1994 biography by Peter Rosen narrated by Dan Rather and originally broadcast on the A&E Network's *Biography* series.

Best of all, there is also the chance to see Cliburn up close and personal on March 25, 2006, when he speaks to the MTNA conference attendees. I expect my own understanding of many things to be enhanced by this talk—the present-day role of classical music in our country, his own remarkable career, the function of modern-day competitions and last, but certainly not least, my own survival in this business. Cliburn's reputation and his career engulf us all.

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