

'A young, tall drink of water from Texas'

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'Van' Cliburn celebrated in a New York City ticker tape parade

Harvey Lavan "Van" Cliburn Jr. achieved worldwide recognition in 1958, at the age of 23, when he won the inaugural quadrennial International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow during the Cold War. It launched a career that spanned more than 50 years until Cliburn's death in 2013.

An article by Ben Finane, of Steinway & Sons describes the impact of this classical music legend: "At the height of the Cold War in 1958, a young, tall drink of water from Texas loped into the lion's den of Moscow and won the piano prize in the inaugural International Tchaikovsky Competition. He won on Russian concertos (Tchaikovsky No. 1, Rachmaninoff No. 3) in front of a group of largely Russian judges that included Kabalevsky, Khachaturian, Oistrakh, Richter and Zimbalist. Shostakovich chaired the competition.

"Reminiscent of rock-star performances of a bygone era by Liszt, Paganini and Paderewski, women at the competition wept and fainted at Van Cliburn's playing. The crowd was on his side. The judges were on his side. Nikita Khrushchev, embracing him after the concert in a great bear hug, was on his side. Looking back, what's striking is not that Van Cliburn won in Russia, but that he won the Russians over.

"When he returned home, Cliburn was an instant hero. He made the cover of Time: The Texan Who Conquered Russia. The twenty-three-year-old was given a ticker-tape parade in New York City. America had never bestowed such an honor on a classical musician — and never will again."

Cliburn's piano will be transported to Alfred University from Fort Worth, Texas, where the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition is taking place.

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