

The texan who conquered russia

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The Texan Who Conquered Russia¹ On March 2008 a tribute dinner was held in honor of the 50th anniversary of Van Cliburn's victory at the First International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition held in Moscow in 1958. ² He instantly became a celebrity around the world, and perhaps more important became a cultural ambassador during the very heated Cold War. ³ Van Cliburn's legacy lives on in many ways both in the music world and in the political realm. His namesake foundation holds its own prestigious quadrennial competition so that other young musicians might have the opportunity to expose their excellent talent on an international stage. ⁴ And though he has not actively participated in the world of classical music for some three decades he still recognized and respected for his own tremendous musical talent and transformation of the music world. ⁵ During the black-tie affair held at the Kimbell Museum in Texas- the Russian Minister of Culture, Yuri Ushakov, honored in his words, " the two Van Cliburns" one, a proud tall and lanky Texan, and the other, an adopted Russian who was mobbed on the streets of Moscow after his victory. ⁶ In this brief paper we will examine the life and times of Van Cliburn and the effect his music had both in the United States and around the world. ⁷

Van Cliburn's musical life began at age 3 when his mother, a pianist of some pedigree in her own right, began to teach him how to play. ⁸ His first musical performance was soon after, and his victory at the Levintritt Competition in 1954 established him a force to be reckoned in the world of virtuoso piano playing. ⁹ His victory at the Tchaikovsky competition was nothing less than transformational. ¹⁰ The Russians had sponsored the competition in order to assert their cultural superiority after establishing their technical superiority illustrated by their launch of Sputnik the year prior. ¹¹ Despite the quality of <https://assignbuster.com/the-texan-who-conquered-russia/>

competitors from around the world, many of the judges fearing retribution and indignation from Khrushchev, were disconcertingly surprised at the virtuosity possessed by the Louisiana born, 23 year-old, curly-haired American. 12 However, his talent was clear and could not be denied even by jaded officials. His performance of Tchaikovsky's 1st Piano Concerto and Rachmaninoff's 3rd earned him an eight minute standing ovation, not only because of the technicality and emotion that Van Cliburn offered the pieces but the audience appreciated his deference in choosing Russian composers' works. 13, 14 When consulting Khrushchev on the unlikely decision they, the judges, were about to make, he asked plainly, "Is he the best" After hearing that he was Khrushchev responded, "Then give him the prize." 15 This single sentence probably did more for a music career than any other in history. His victory reached the shores of the US almost immediately, and was seen as no less than a victory in the Cold War. 16 Though Van Cliburn claimed that he was unaware at the moment he received the award what the cultural and political ramifications were going to be, it soon became clear as his guileless charm and obvious skill were respected and appreciated by the Muscovite crowds. Moreover, his first prize made him a national hero at home. 17 His heroic status is evident and unique as he was and still is the only classical musician ever to be honored with a ticker-tape parade in New York City's Time Square. 18

There are some detractors who suggest that the results of the Tchaikovsky Competition were skewed because of the intense pressure on the judges and the creative scorekeeping that was involved. Furthermore, musically some suggest that his performance was not as technically proficient as others, but had an emotional appeal that was hard to resist suggesting that his playing

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style was a cross between " Horowitz, Liberace, and Elvis Presley." 19 Despite the negative nature of these comments most musical experts agree that indeed it was his emotional tenor and his ability to sense rhythm that propelled him to such great heights. 20 Nevertheless, his schedule remained hectic and busy throughout the next two decades after his victory in Moscow acting as an important cultural emissary around the world as a symbol of American compassion and social awareness in a time when there were few such emissaries. 21 He performed for Presidents and Premiers, adults and children in order to promote cultural sensitivity and community. 22 Coming out of semi-retirement in 1987 to play a concert at the White House for then president Ronald Regan and Mikhail Gorbachev, the event was seen as the death knell of the Cold War, and it was thought who better else to sound that death knell other than the man who partially made it possible through his music. 23

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