

## Van Cliburn Competition Looks for the Best of the Best

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is!

Hello, I'm Steve Ember.

Today on our program, we make beautiful music. Well, we may not be making it, but we *will* celebrate some very talented young people who do at a world famous competition – and the memory of the American concert pianist whose belief in young talent made it possible.

Every four years since 1962, musicians gather from all over the world to compete in the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. This month, 30 competitors, ages 19 to 30 gathered in Fort Worth, Texas for the event. They played for a group of jurors, experts in the world of piano performance. Many other people watched the performances, either in person or through live video webcasts.

Six finalists were chosen after a series of concerts and chamber music performances.

Pianists need years of study and countless hours of training to get into the finals of the Van Cliburn competition. They also need the ability to play their best – even if they are very nervous.

“I’ve done a lot of competitions in the past, starting from when I was just an undergrad at Julliard (school).”

Sean Chen of California was one of the six finalists. He remembered losing out early in his first few international competitions, but he kept trying.

“I started doing international competitions and I’d be, always, you know, first-round knock out, 2<sup>nd</sup> round knock out, and that happened for a long time...But I kept trying. (At) Leeds, I got to the semifinals...and now I’m at Cliburn, the biggest competition, I’ve gotten to the finals, so I’m like whoo. So it’s pretty exciting.”

He explained why the Van Cliburn competition is so important.

“Cliburn has one of the largest-reaching kind of influence(s) of any competition, I think... As far as being up to date and with the social media and the broadcasting. Cliburn does a really great job with all that, I mean the web-streaming and they have like a Hollywood camera crew following us all around. All the finalists get management...All the finalists get concerts in the next four years. That’s most important thing, for any up and coming young artist...”

The judges have a hard job. Every pianist they hear during the early part of the competition is excellent. Each one has great technical skill and gives thoughtful interpretations of the music. The judges say that even to the well-trained ear, the pianists sound outstanding. So the judges look for nuances – differences in shading and expression. John Giordano, the jury chairman of the competition, explains:

“It’s not a matter of judging technical prowess. That’s almost taken for granted...Some aspects are pretty simple. Do I want to hear this person again? Sometimes it’s something as simple as goose bumps. It’s not a matter, did they play right notes or wrong notes. If they miss notes and the message is there, and it really reaches you, you ignore that, you don’t realize it. When you hear somebody who really moves you, it’s not difficult. It’s wonderful, it’s very exciting.”

The event is extremely high pressure with difficult competition. But young pianists, like Beatrice Rana from Italy, say it is worth it.

“(Because it’s) one of the most important piano competitions in the world, and it’s one of the few competitions that provide a stable career for the finalists.. I think a good placement in the Cliburn (competition) can provide a wonderful future for someone that aspires to be a concert pianist.”

The judges chose a winner after hearing the pianists perform individually, as part of a small group and with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra. Excitement was high as the announcement was made:

“And our gold medalist, from the Ukraine, Vadym Kholodenko...”

## **About the Man Who Inspired the Competition...**

This was the first Van Cliburn International Piano Competition since the death of the man for whom it was named. Van Cliburn died of bone cancer earlier this year at his home in Fort Worth, Texas. He was 78 years old.

Cliburn once said that the goal of his artistic life was bringing pleasure to those who heard him play.

[Cliburn plays Tchaikowsky Piano Concerto No.1]

“You’re always hoping to play well. And if you don’t play well, YOU are the unhappiest person. So you want to please your audience.”

And please his audiences he did.

Van Cliburn was 23 years old when he performed in the famous Tchaikovsky International Competition in Moscow, in April of 1958. This was at the height of the Cold War period between the then Soviet Union and the United States. The Soviets had, only months earlier, launched the first orbiting earth satellite, Sputnik One. The Tchaikovsky competition was intended to also demonstrate Soviet *cultural* superiority.

But Cliburn's performances, including this music, the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No.1, had the Russian audience chanting "First Prize! First Prize!"

There was concern about awarding first prize to an American, but when premier Nikita Khrushchev was approached for his permission, he asked "Was he the Best? Then give it to him."

His victory launched a career that made him unusually famous for a classical musician. He also became a hero to music-loving people in the former Soviet Union.

Following the competition, a ticker tape parade in New York's Lower Manhattan, with 100,000 people lining the streets, welcomed him back to the United States.

His RCA Victor recording of the Tchaikovsky Concerto was the first classical recording to gain platinum status by selling over a million copies within a year. It is still available on CD.

[Cliburn plays music by Chopin]

Throughout his career, he had a great interest in encouraging young people to take up classical music. He established the annual Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in his home town of Fort Worth.

"It's been so interesting to see the young people come. They meet each other and have friendships and musical correspondences. It's really very exciting. And it's like the same feeling I had when I went to Russia in 1958. The warmth and camaraderie – it carried through all through the years."

He also encouraged the careers of young performers by creating several scholarship programs.

[Cliburn plays sections of Rachmaninoff Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 3]

Cliburn continued to perform concerts and solo recitals, but in 1978, he walked off the stage, professionally exhausted. He would play occasionally in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but he mainly lived out his final years outside of the public spotlight.

A favorite saying of Van Cliburn was his take on a statement by the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff: "Great music is enough for a lifetime. But a lifetime is not enough for great music."

And that's "As It Is" from VOA Learning English. A reminder – for the latest world news tune in VOA News at the top of the hour Universal Time, both on radio and our web site. I'm Steve Ember. Thanks for joining us.