

Houston Symphony at 13, and at 14 was heard in Carnegie Hall. Appearances, prizes, and awards followed in a regular spate without amounting to public recognition or a genuine career. At 17 he had begun studies with Rosina Lhévinne at the Juilliard School -- taken with his mother's Liszt/Friedheim connection, he became an unselfconscious inheritor of the grand Romantic tradition. And it was Rosina Lhévinne who prompted his entrance to the Tchaikovsky Competition. Following his win, of course, Cliburn enjoyed a major career, and the recordings he made in the succeeding decade possess a large-scale grandeur. He was at his best in Romantic repertoire -- Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, Grieg, MacDowell, Rachmaninov -- though his Mozart and Beethoven can seem academic. And with the years, the grand manner devolved into careless mannerism as the public clamored for a reprise of the Tchaikovsky Concerto No. 1. He founded the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1962, to which he devoted more time than to his own career as a performing artist. His return to the concert scene after a ten-year sabbatical was hardly noticed. In August 2012 it was announced that Cliburn was suffering from advanced bone cancer, and he passed away at home in Fort Worth in February 2013 at the age of 78. But the legend, the peculiar kairos that realized itself through him, remains imperishable.

Van Cliburn
Brahms Concerto No. 1
Boston Symphony Orchestra / Erich Leinsdorf



Johannes Brahms was 20 years old when, in 1853, he first made the acquaintance of Robert Schumann through a letter of recommendation provided by the famous violinist Joseph Joachim. It was Schumann's unabashed praise of the music that Brahms showed him that, more than anything else, provided the young composer with the courage necessary to begin work on a full-scale symphony the next year. That courage, however, fell short in the end -- Brahms felt himself too inexperienced and was too haunted by the "footsteps of a giant" (Beethoven) to begin fruitful symphonic work -- and Brahms reorganized the material he had written as a sonata for two pianos. By 1858, this sonata for two pianos had itself been reborn as the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15.

The Piano Concerto No. 1 as we know it today is a complete reworking of the ideas and themes of the original duo-sonata source; much of it is completely new music. The premiere of the piece in January 1859 was not the failure that it is sometimes portrayed to have been, but the cold response at a follow-up performance in Leipzig left a bitter taste in Brahms' mouth that he never forgot -- Leipzig remained an enemy for the rest of his life.

The concerto is in three movements: Maestoso, Adagio, and Allegro non troppo. The orchestral exposition to the giant Maestoso is mighty, epic, and tragic in no small portion; much later, a radiant, chorale-like second idea is offered by the soloist, who Brahms provides with the kind of rich, deep sonorities so characteristic of his piano writing. At the recapitulation, which is ushered in by a massive climax in which the pianist is forced to use all his/her strength to compete with the massive orchestral bursts, the pianist boldly takes over the mighty utterances that began the movement.

Brahms wrote the words "Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" at the head of the slow movement, but whether the words are an homage to Robert Schumann (whom Brahms sometimes called Domini), a portrait of Clara Schumann (the most popular interpretation, and one seemingly supported by a letter from Brahms to Clara), or some other reference is unknown.

The rondo-theme of the finale is introduced by the piano alone, and, later on, the soloist gets his/her one and only chance to impress the audience with a cadenza -- though it is dramatic necessity, not garish virtuosity, that demands the cadenza in the first place.

Kairos is a word used by ancient Greek writers to signify "the right point of time...the exact or critical time..." of action, a favorable planetary conjunction, or otherwise. Cliburn's career was an illustration. In the tensest days of the Cold War -- of Civil Defense, air raid sirens, bomb shelters, atomic angst, and the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik that put the Russians first into space -- handsome, lanky 6'4", 23-year-old Van Cliburn, with his Southerner's air of innocent modesty and tremendous keyboard technique, in April 1958 carried off the Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow with a transcendent performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. Timing -- kairos -- and talent combined to make his triumph symbolic, heroic, and permanently memorable; the recording he made of it soon after, with Kiril Kondrashin conducting the RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra, is warmly glowing with an incomparable magic that has kept his performance competitive with later interpreters decade after decade. But such moments do not happen without preparation. Cliburn's mother, who had studied with Liszt pupil Arthur Friedheim, was his first teacher. He gave his first recital at 4, played with the

Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1

Van Cliburn, piano

Erich Leinsdorf conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra

I. Maestoso

II. Adagio

III. Rondo (Allegro Non Troppo)

Released by RCA Records 1964

Engineer - Lewis Layton Producer - Richard Mohr



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