

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 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.

# Tchaikovsky

## Piano Concerto No. 1

### Van Cliburn, piano

#### Kiril Kondrashin

#### RCA Symphony Orchestra



It is here for the first time the listener witnesses the masterful talents of the young pianist Van Cliburn, a native of rural Texas. This record displays his engaging presence and enthralling melodic technique after his thrilling victory in the premiere International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in April of 1958. With overwhelming passion and remarkable deliverance of musical clarity, Van Cliburn performs a stirring rendition of Tchaikovsky's "Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor." Cliburn performed a series of concerts in leading cities immediately following the Moscow competition, and Alan Kayes' album notes printed on the record's back cover state that, according to reports from Russia, "Not within living memory has a musician, regardless of nationality, had such an impact on the critical, sophisticated Soviet metropolitan audiences." During his first showing at the competition's preliminaries, Cliburn caused a sensation. Word got through Russia of his quality of charm, passion, and daring image at the piano. The finals were set for April 11, in which he played Tchaikovsky's "First Concerto" and Rachmaninov's "Third" with the Moscow Symphony Orchestra under the conduction of Kiril P. Kondrashin with a shimmering brilliance. The results were positive and left the audience intrigued and ecstatic. "The crowd then chanted in unision,

'First-prize! First-prize!' for their adored favorite," notes Kayes.

This record is a perfect reflection of Van Cliburn's accomplishment, one that later found him playing a series of recitals in the United States, including twice in Carnegie Hall before capacity audiences. His concert in Philadelphia resulted in a standing ovation, unprecedented in the history of the Academy of Music. This record is a masterful piece of art, filled with the beauty and eloquence of a artist whose playing reaches the highest level of classical musicianship. Van Cliburn is most revered for his electrifying octave passages, and his ability to produce a tremendous variety of volume and tone. "He could, if he desired, make a magnificent impression as a master of the showier side of his art," noted Winthrop Seargent in his article for The New Yorker. "But the most arresting thing about his playing is his mastery of other things -- the tasteful and assured use of rubato in the style of the distinguished virtuosos of the past, the delicacy in executing pianissimos, the sure sense of musical phraseology, the feeling for restraint as well as climax, and all the remaining elements of musical sensitivity that go to make up a superb keyboard artist."

# **Tchaikovsky**

## **Piano Concerto No. 1**

### **Van Cliburn, piano**

#### **Kiril Kondrashin**

#### **RCA Symphony Orchestra**

- 1 Allegro Non Troppo E Molto Maestoso; Allegro Con Spirito 20:35
- 2 Andante Simplicite Prestissimo; Tempo I 7:05
- 3 Allegro Con Fuoco 6:47

Recorded by RCA 1958 Directed By - John Pfeiffer  
Engineer - John Crawford



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