

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.

Van Cliburn in Moscow

Grieg Piano Concerto

Chopin Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52

Kirill Kondrashin - Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra



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Despite the steady stream of accolades for his playing, Cliburn did not break into the top ranks of concert pianists during the mid-1950s. Requests to perform had decreased significantly by late in the decade, and he found himself in debt. Further interrupting his progress was his mother's illness, which necessitated his return home to Killgore to help out with his mother's teaching and physical needs. Although he was ready to stage a European tour in 1958, he was urged by Lhevinne and others to take part in the first International Tchaikovsky piano competition to take place in Moscow that year. In hopes of resuscitating his flagging career, Cliburn practiced up to 11 hours a day for two months while preparing his pieces for the Moscow performance.

Cliburn's work for the Tchaikovsky competition paid off, and almost immediately he took the proceedings by storm. Despite rumors that the Soviet cultural ministers had already ordered the prize to be awarded to a Soviet musician, Cliburn's mastery and his massive popularity with thousands of fervent Soviet fans overruled any favoritism. The judges were unanimous in awarding him the top prize, even though Cliburn had to play with a bandaged index finger and suffered a broken piano string during his final concert.

Many musicians and critics in the Soviet Union compared Cliburn's performing and tour of Russia to that of Liszt in the previous century. Further publicizing the victory was Americans' eagerness to find an edge over the Soviet Union after the Russians' successful launching of Sputnik, which put a human in

space for the first time. By winning the adulation of both Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Cliburn seemed to have single-handedly eased Cold War tensions. He was quoted in *Texas Monthly* as saying, "I think that political events come, and they pass. They have no staying power. But art always remains with us."

Cliburn returned to the United States to a welcome similar to that received by Charles Lindbergh after his epic transatlantic flight in the 1920s. He was the only classical musician in history to be honored by a ticker-tape parade in New York City, and his face appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine as "The Texan Who Conquered Russia." He cashed in on his new fame by signing the most lucrative recording contract ever, with RCA Victor. His debut recording of Tchaikovsky's B-flat Minor Concerto for his new label became the first classical record to achieve sales of one million dollars.

Cliburn was besieged by requests to appear on talk shows and to perform upon his return to the United States. After appearing at Carnegie Hall to thunderous acclaim, he moved on to concert engagements in Philadelphia, Chicago, Hollywood, and Denver. Next he went abroad to play in Brussels, London, Amsterdam, and Paris. Cliburn demonstrated his patriotism in every performance of his concerts by leading off with his rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner."

Van Cliburn in Moscow

Grieg Piano Concerto

Chopin Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52
Kirill Kondrashin - Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra

Grieg Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 16 31:12
1 Allegro molto moderato 13:58
2 Adagio 6:19
3 Allegro moderato molto e marcato 10:55
4 Chopin Ballade No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 52 11:54

Recorded by Meloydia 1958 (Live Recording)



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