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CLASSICAL MUSIC

The Tchaikovsky Competition, 50 years later

The baby-faced pianist was 23 when he beat out an international field in Moscow in 1958 and became a U.S. hero. That was a different era from today.

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THERE was a time, half a century ago, when a certain classical music competition meant more than just another young speed demon trying to wow a fractious group of judges. A lot more.

It was the spring of 1958. Many Americans were still reeling from the launch of Sputnik only months before, wondering if the nation was losing its edge over the Soviet Union. Against this tense background came word of a new contest in the U.S.S.R. named after Russia's most famous composer, Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky.

Fifty years on, there is still an International Tchaikovsky Competition every four years. But nowadays, it can seem just another among the plethora of such contests that have sprung up in its wake. The situation is somewhat analogous to the state of boxing's heavyweight division (now dominated by Russians): many titles, each with less clout, where once there was one generally recognized champ.

In 1958, the Tchaikovsky had only two categories: piano and violin. And few people noticed that an American -- one Joyce Flissler -- managed to squeeze out seventh prize in a field that also included six Russians and one Romanian in the violin finals.

Instead, all eyes and ears were on the piano competition, in which a 6-foot-4, bushy-haired, baby-faced 23-year-old Texan was competing with a phalanx of international contestants, including three Russians in the finals. His name was Harvey Lavan Cliburn Jr., and he arrived out of central casting to represent a nation apparently longing for someone, anyone, who could wrestle the Russian bear to the ground on its home turf.

Van Cliburn won the gold medal and came home a national hero. He was paraded through New York City, with ticker tape flying. He made the cover of Time. Columbia and RCA Victor fought for his services, and his first record, an LP of the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1, became the first million-selling classical album. The story of jurors having to ask Khrushchev himself whether or not to award first prize to an American indicates how high the stakes were -- and how unimaginable this frenzy would be to today's public.

Another then-23-year-old American pianist who also made his way into the finals, Daniel Pollack (he came in eighth), recalls the excitement all too well. "It was a hair-raising experience," Pollack, now a professor of piano at the USC Thornton School of Music, said recently. "Because of the impact of the Cold War, there was quite a lot of hype in the streets. Everybody knew about it because it was broadcast and on television. Russia's sphere of influence was enormous then -- including China."

Part of the aura of legend surrounding the first Tchaikovsky Competition emanated from the personalities involved. Shostakovich was the chairman of the competition. Revered pianist Emil Gilels was president of the piano jury. Composers Dmitri Kabalevsky and Arthur Bliss and the equally celebrated pianist Sviatoslav Richter were jurors. David Oistrakh, whose centenary occurs this year, served as president of the violin jury, which boasted such eminent violinists as Leonid Kogan and Efrem Zimbalist as well as composer Aram Khachaturian.

Lina Baranov, who teaches piano at Biola University (her husband, Mark, is assistant concertmaster with the Los Angeles Philharmonic), was a student at the Central School for Gifted Children in Moscow in 1958, and she too remembers the heady atmosphere vividly.

"I listened to a dress rehearsal of Van Cliburn when he played Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3," she says. "It was incredible. People were crying. One pianist said that his playing reminded him of Sergei Rachmaninoff. At that time, we never heard Rachmaninoff 3 in Russia. It was so beautiful, so inspiring."

Thanks in great part to the Cold War, the Tchaikovsky reigned as the grandest name in competitions at least through the

early 1980s, serving as a launching pad for several international figures, including violinists Gidon Kremer and Viktoria Mullova.

Declining stature

YET as the times changed, the Tchaikovsky began to suffer a gradual decline of influence. Perestroika may have been a historic loosening of the chains that bound the Russian people and the Eastern Bloc, but it also signaled the dissipation of the political dimension that seemed to intensify the competition. Moreover, no American ever took first prize in the piano competition after Cliburn, and there have been only occasional U.S. first-prize winners -- among them soprano Deborah Voigt and cellist Nathaniel Rosen -- in the other four categories.

There have also been rumors of bias among Russian jurors whose students were competing, as well as complaints about substandard living conditions for the contestants amid the general chaos surrounding the Soviet breakup. The long-standing point system of scoring came under fire too.

Pollack suggested another factor that may have diminished the stature of the competition: The Tchaikovsky offers a \$20,000 first prize. The José Iturbi Competition at UCLA in June, by contrast, has allocated \$50,000 for first prize in only its second year -- as will the Cleveland International Piano Competition in 2009. The Van Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth offers \$20,000, plus three years of concert tours and career management, plus a CD on the Harmonia Mundi label, for all three top prizes. Other contests dangle grand pianos worth tens of thousands of dollars as prizes, along with variations of the above.

What the Tchaikovsky still offers is the brand name, but -- what with the soaring costs of airfare and lodging and the increasing difficulty of making a career in classical music -- that and \$21.98 might buy you the latest CD by Van Cliburn laureate Olga Kern.

"There's an illusion that competitions are a guaranteed path to a career, and perhaps some people are seeing through that," says Charles Fierro, professor emeritus of piano at Cal State Northridge. "They are an artificial construction that has been useful to some but not so useful to many.

"When people win competitions, they win about a year of concerts and then they are dropped in favor of the next winner. It's unfortunate that there is no long-term commitment to the winners, because that is what they need. I think the whole competition scene needs to be rethought."

With the intent of sprucing up the Tchaikovsky's image, a few things did change during the most recent competition in 2007 (postponed a year because of a planned renovation of the Moscow Conservatory in 2006 that wound up not taking place). Organizers tried to recruit more jurors and contestants from outside Russia, and Mstislav Rostropovich -- the first president of the cello jury back in 1962 -- was brought back as chairman of the competition, a position he held until his death last April. Also, the controversial point system was eliminated, replaced by open voting, and the competition's avowed goal now is to try to give the winners more help in sustaining their careers after the event is over.

Pollack finds it interesting that of all the 1958 piano finalists, he is probably the only one who remains very much on the performing radar. Van Cliburn is in semi-retirement, playing only on rare occasions. Two others have died. Meanwhile, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the competition, Pollack will travel to St. Petersburg in late July to play a concerto with Valery Gergiev and the Kirov Orchestra and then return Dec. 28 to play the Tchaikovsky Concerto No. 1 with Yuri Simonov in Moscow.

"Many times the most outstanding pianist is not chosen," he said. "It's even a shock to the person who won.

"But the Tchaikovsky still has a huge name and grandeur because it's considered the preeminent competition of modern times. We have a proliferation of competitions, but the Tchaikovsky has a mystique about it. It's the prestige of Moscow, plus the Russian audiences that know music so unbelievably well. I don't think that can be replaced."

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