

Van Cliburn and the Kamikaze Kids

Many serious musicians I know turn up their noses at Van Cliburn. I've always assumed this was from the same motives that I think make academic anthropologists badmouth Margaret Mead—the professionals are downright jealous of the colleague who has won acclaim from the masses. So I assumed.

I was glad, therefore, to get to hear Van Cliburn Monday night. It is too bad it had to be in Mac Court, but that is part of it. Cliburn tours the Mac Courts of this country and, presumably, other countries. That's what he's chosen for his career. He's the guy the parents drag their kids to see, the guy the non-aficionados give up bowling or a

Bogart flick to hear. If the setting has to be a cow barn, he can't let that stand in the way of culture.

My musician acquaintances have said everything he plays sounds like Tchaikowsky. He played Brahms, Beethoven, Chopin and Debussy on Monday evening. I couldn't get into the first couple of pieces, Brahms' Opus 118, Two Intermezzi. It sounded so much like a piano in a gym. I kept flashing on "Go Ducks" and "Romania Chevrolet." Brahms' Opus 79, Two Rhapsodies, were familiar and had lovely passages, but you couldn't tell if he was playing loudly or softly, there was such a muddy edge to it.

Either I got used to that acoustic hassle or he adjusted his relationship to the Steinway—or both—by the time he played Beethoven's Sonata in E flat major, Opus 31, No. 3. The problem now was what seemed to be too sudden shifts, abrupt leaps. It's a playful piece, but Beethoven might not have meant all of the play to be so rambunctious.

After the intermission the audience had sifted down: a few hundred virtuous parents had left, kids in tow. They missed Chopin's Ballade in F minor, No. 4, Opus 52 and the E major Nocturne, No. 2, Opus 62. These even more than the earlier numbers were a showcase for Cliburn's incredible technique. He's been known from the first for his "wingspan" of two notes over an octave. These selections included all sorts of flashy sections, rolls, runs intricacies, and some enchanting sections.

At certain points I thought it bordered on the schmaltzy—a rush followed by a rapid deceleration—but again, that could have been my sublimated resentment at having to sit on the hard bleacher. Throughout the second portion of the evening, people surreptitiously walked out, not always waiting for the end of a number.

Cliburn did not falter. He seemed to be sincerely feeling the emotion of the music, in his head—if not in his heart of hands. Somehow the sight of the south basket must have inspired him. His neck swayed with the flexibility of a coiled wire.

In planning the program he seems to have borne in mind the hard bleachers, or the attention span of basketball-loving concert-goers. The brief Chopins were followed by three very brief, virtuoso pieces by Debussy—Etude no. 5 Pour les Octaves, La Terrasse des Audiences au Claire de Lune, and Feux d'Artifice. All were very broad; the last was very busy. Afterward, in response to standing ovations, he granted two encores. For me these were the most successful numbers of the evening—Debussy's "Claire de Lune" and Chopin's Polonaise in A flat.

His manner was gracious and pleasant, nothing to suggest the temperament of, say, a Bobby Fischer. His hair didn't seem at all as extreme as I remember it, in those early photos of the prodigy who won the competition in the Soviet Union and brought glory to the State of Texas. It's just a modified Afro. Maybe he has trimmed it.

Clearly he likes what he does for a living. His wide grin after every number confirmed the boyishness in his gait, which was almost gawky at times. His grin was the same, or seemed so from the bleachers, when the audience gauchely applauded between movements of the Beethoven sonata.

The prize of the evening for gaucheness, however, must go to the chairman of the Eugene and University Music Association, sponsors of the event. He insisted on giving a pitch for money before and after the recital and at half-time—er, intermission. It seems the EUMA wants to have enough subscriptions guaranteed for next season so they can sign up a Soviet dance troupe which has never toured outside Russia before. Membership cards were distributed with the Cliburn program, which was fine, but it did not seem necessary for the man to hop on the stage after the pianist's encore and croon into his hand mike, "If that wasn't worth your ten bucks, I don't know what is."

Abbie Ziffren

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