

VAN CLIBURN

a new kind of national hero

Here's why this gangling young pianist has won popular acclaim never before accorded a classical musician.

by Bernard Asbell

ONE NIGHT LAST SUMMER I stood in Chicago's Grant Park, on the shore of Lake Michigan, at the outer edge of the largest assembly of human beings I have ever seen. People around me were standing on tiptoe, trying to peer between the heads of other people standing on tiptoe in front of them.

About 200 yards ahead of me this tiptoe crowd stopped short, right behind another vast compression of people sitting on benches. At the far end of the spectacle—about a quarter of a mile away—there was a brilliantly lit bandshell, and in it I could barely make out a white-coated stick of a man—a long, thin back, long arms, long legs, and hair gleaming in the distance like the tiny diamond on the head of a stickpin. He was playing the piano.

Except for the liquid notes from the loud-speaker, it was so quiet I could almost hear the lapping water on the lake's edge.

Eighty-eight thousand people had come to hear Van Cliburn, the 23-year-old Texan who had gone to Russia to compete against Russians in playing Russian music before Russian judges. He had come home not only the winner but one of the most publicized and celebrated classical musicians in history.

In fact, curiously, it was something more than celebration. It was a kind of frenzy. The moment the concert ended that night, part of the crowd surged forward toward the bandshell. There, at the side door near a couple of waiting cars, they pushed and elbowed. A few shrieked and some young girls clutched desperately at their hair, carried away by the knowledge that they were only an arm's length away from their six-foot, four-inch dreamboat. Somewhere I had seen this frenzy before, and then I remembered—it had been outside the dressing room of Elvis Presley!

When I mentioned this later to some of my music-loving friends, they were appalled.

"How awful!" one of them said. "I would

like to believe that Van Cliburn's popularity is a sign of a growing appreciation in America for better things. But it's not. Teen-agers are pulling their hair out over him only because he's celebrated. They don't know the difference between his music and rock-and-roll, and they care less. Sometimes I think there's no hope."

Well, I take exception to my friend's view. I think the spectacle of young girls pulling their hair out over a lanky, mop-haired, doll-faced performer of Tchaikowsky is a good sign of national health.

It's the natural function of teen-agers to get worked up, to wring their hands, to pull their hair at the sudden discovery of emotions they think nobody has ever experienced before.

In my teen-age day, girls affixed their lipstick imprints to the portrait of Frank Sinatra outside New York's Paramount Theater. In those days, we had no Tchaikowsky-playing Van Cliburn to compete for their shrieks. Today we have, and that's progress.

"What Van Cliburn has given classical music is glamour." These are the words of Eugene Istomin who, until Cliburn exploded on the scene, was considered America's fastest-rising piano star. Instead of resenting the new competition, Istomin threw his hat in the air: "Van has reminded the world that musically we are no longer a cowboy country."

I have talked about his success with Van Cliburn himself, with some of his friends and one of his managers. To use a trite expression, all this couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

VAN'S BEST QUALITIES—modesty and intent concern for self-improvement—are illustrated by an incident last May. He arrived at the RCA Victor studios on East 24th Street in Manhattan to hear tapes of his Carnegie Hall concert the night before. He had come straight from the Waldorf-Astoria where Mayor Wagner had honored Cliburn with a festive luncheon.

Before lunch, he was the star of the first ticker-tape parade New York had ever given a musician. The next night he was to play in Philadelphia, then go to Washington to meet President Eisenhower at the White House and dine at the Russian Embassy. Sunday night he was to play for all America on the Steve Allen Show and during the next week give another Carnegie Hall concert, already a sellout.

But the only thing on Van's mind was a critical hearing of those tapes. As the resounding chords marched majestically, Van stiffened.



A conqueror's welcome, like that usually given athletes and war heroes, greets pianist Van Cliburn in New York.