

"Listen here—now." His finger harpooned the air. "I made such a mistake there. Did you hear it?"

One might well ask—and many already have—how come this snub-nosed, gangling young pianist happened to become an overnight hero. America is not in the habit of idolizing its classical musicians.

Perhaps the answer is partly that Van Cliburn is not at all like the common conception of a classical pianist. He is a fourth-generation American on both sides of the family, as Southern as hominy grits. When he's not at the keyboard, he loves to sit behind the wheel of a big, smooth car. The day after his Chicago concert, an automobile company loaned him a cream-colored convertible so he could drive his visiting parents around town. This seemed to delight him more than winning six encores at the concert.

His traveling bag is a small drugstore of tonic bottles and pillboxes, and he eagerly tries out every new health preparation he hears about. He is addicted to deep-breathing exercises, especially for relaxing before a concert. At a Moscow reception, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, a compact chunk of man, gazed at Van's skyscraper frame and commented, "They must eat plenty of yeast in Texas."

"No," Van replied. "Just vitamin pills."

He is disarmingly untemperamental. Once, during a rehearsal with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, he rose from the piano and headed backstage. Conductor Thor Johnson wondered what had offended the boy, when Van drawled back over his shoulder, "Keep 'em playing, Maestro, I'm just going to the slot machine for a candy bar."

Instead of the movie caricature of a wild-eyed long-hair, Van looks like a choir boy—which he has been. When Billy Graham brought his crusade to Madison Square Garden, Van sang in the choir.

Twenty percent of all his earnings are donated to the Baptist Church. Once he turned down a \$500 concert date so he could play for a church banquet in Paramus, N. J. Josef Krips, conductor of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, recalls the time when Van came to his dressing room a few minutes before they were to start a concert.

"Maestro," said Van, "let us pray." Krips, a Roman Catholic, dropped to his knees, and Van said, "God give us the grace and the power to make good music together."

THESE INCIDENTS come as no surprise to Van's mother, Mrs. Harvey Lavan Cliburn.

"He knows his ability comes from God, and this keeps him humble as well as confident," she has said. "He has been taught from infancy that one success does not insure another."

And his mother taught Van at least one other important thing. When he was only three, she taught him to play the piano.

Mrs. Cliburn had studied in New York under distinguished teachers and was all set for a concert career, but her mother forbade it. After settling in Shreveport, La., with her husband, Mrs. Cliburn was ecstatic at discovering that her tiny son had a natural affinity for the piano. Before he could read words, he could read music. At the age of four he strutted out on the stage of Dodd College in Shreveport and played a prelude by Bach.

Two years later, the family moved to Kilgore,



Bobby-soxers, forgetting guitarists and wailers, fight to touch hands that thrilled music world.

Tex., where they still live. Van's father, an executive with the Magnolia Petroleum Co., had always hoped Van would grow up to become a medical missionary. But even at six Van was plainly headed for a musical career, so Mr. Cliburn had a piano studio built in the back of his garage. Every morning before going to school, Van practiced for an hour. When he came home and again after dinner, practice.

Upon graduating from high school at 17, Van headed for New York and a scholarship at the Juilliard School of Music. The world-famed pianist and teacher Rosina Lhevinne heard a knock on her studio door one morning. When she opened it, there stood a beanpole of a lad, sandy hair drooping over a friendly face.

"Honey," Van Cliburn announced, "looks like I'm goin' to be studyin' with you."

Mme. Lhevinne had never heard of him, but she invited him to play.

"Right then I said, 'This is an unbelievable talent.' His mother taught him very well."

At this point in Van Cliburn's story, let's get one thing straight. The Russians didn't invent him. They merely put him into orbit when the prize they gave him last April sent his name whirling around the world.

The small band of people who watch the comings and goings of unusually talented piano players discovered Van Cliburn more than four years ago, but nobody paid much attention. That was when he won the Leventritt Award, an annual prize given to young American musicians which corresponds in the little world of classical music to the Oscar in the big world of motion pictures.

It is considered the toughest music prize to win, much tougher than the Moscow prize. In fact, until Cliburn competed for it in 1954, the Leventritt Award had been withheld for five years because nobody had turned up whom the judges considered deserving of it.

In 1955, the Leventritt victory brought Van a profitable year of concerts, then 1956 was somewhat less profitable. By 1957, he was playing for his supper in a Manhattan restaurant. Then his mother became ill and Van returned to Kilgore to take over her piano students.

A LETTER CAME one day from Rosina Lhevinne suggesting that Van enter the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow in April. His managers in New York were cool to the idea. The Leventritt Award, they figured, proved all that was necessary about Van's skill



At Kremlin, Soviet chief Khrushchev chats with Van (second on right) and other young artists.

and, furthermore, glory earned in Moscow is not popular in the Western world today. But when a friend in New York quietly arranged the fare for American contestants, Van decided to go.

He turned up in Moscow with a Bible and a single dress shirt with a plastic collar. At the preliminary auditions, he caught fire with the Russian musical community and everybody began to buzz about "Vanyushka." Soon officials began to woo him, then teen-agers began to pursue him in the streets. His hotel room became a crammed warehouse of gifts.

Nobody had expected the competition to become so dramatic an event. In fact, American Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson hadn't planned to attend the finals until Van's fellow contestants, sensing a major international incident in the making, persuaded Thompson it would be a mistake to stay home.

Even the Russians were surprised by the emotional uprising. Moscow TV had scheduled a broadcast of the first half of Cliburn's victory concert, but the public clamor was so great that they had to broadcast the entire program, including encores. In Leningrad, tickets for Van's appearance vanished so quickly that he put on a public rehearsal in the afternoon and admitted music students free.

After he returned home wearing a national hero's mantle for which he had never been measured, I wondered how gracefully he was prepared to wear it. One morning shortly after his return, I watched Cliburn in one of his first meetings with the press, looking for clues.

One newspaper reporter, eager for a hot quotation no matter how irrelevant, asked the beaming-faced pianist:

"Do you think the present crisis in Lebanon, where the Russians and Americans seem to be on the verge of war, will now undo all the good you did while you were in Moscow?"

I have seen a lot of fancy curves pitched at press conferences and a lot of sophisticated public figures felled by them. How was this 23-year-old small-town student of music, whose every word would now be amplified around the world, going to swing at that one?

Van crossed his chest with his left arm, leaned his right elbow on it, and fingered his lip—just as President Eisenhower does when a reporter feeds him a hot one. Then he said slowly:

"I think political events come and they pass. They have no staying power. But art always remains with us."

He had socked a homer!