

TCHAIKOVSKY

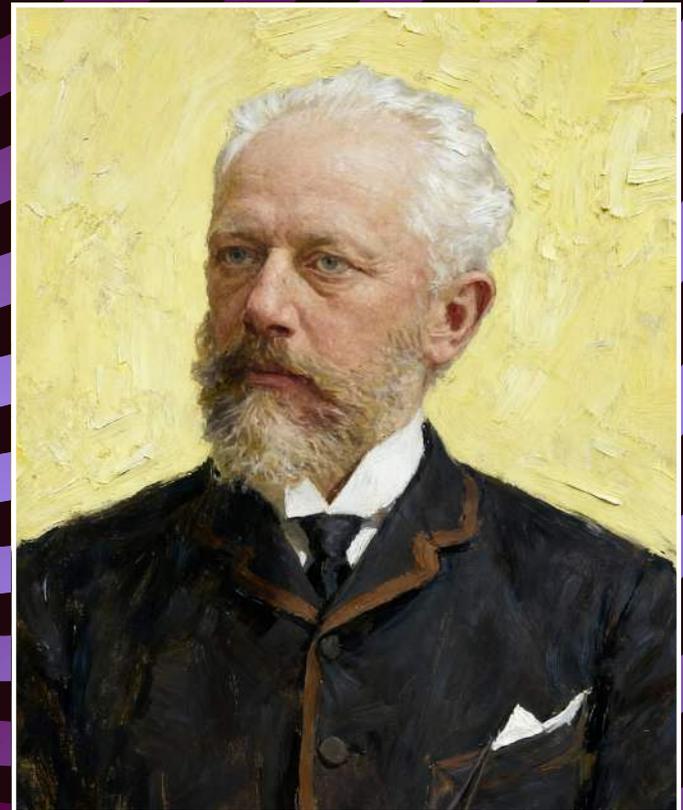
Piano Concerto No. 1 in b-flat minor

The Recording Debut of

VAN CLIBURN

Moscow Philharmonic

Kirill Kondrashin



Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky
Piano Concerto No. 1 in b-flat minor,
Op. 23, TH 55

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | I. Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso - Allegro con spirito | 21:25 |
| 2 | II. Andantino semplice - Prestissimo - Tempo I | 7:03 |
| 3 | III. Allegro con fuoco | 6:54 |

Van Cliburn, piano
Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra
Kirill Kondrashin, conductor

Recorded in 1958

Georgy Dudkevich, producer and engineer

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Piotr Ilich Tchaikovsky (1840-93) was occupied with three works in 1874: the *Second String Quartet in F major* (Op. 22), an opera *Vakula the Smith* and at the tail end of the year, his ***First Piano Concerto in b-flat minor*** (Op. 23). The concerto had yet to be orchestrated when, on Christmas Eve 1874, he showed it to Nikolai Rubinstein, who he hoped would welcome a new work offering new challenges to the performer. He was completely taken aback by Rubinstein's negative comments and the composer commented afterwards: 'It seems that my concerto is worthless, unplayable and passages so awkward and clumsy that nothing could be done to put them right.' When Rubinstein saw the effects his negativity had upon Tchaikovsky he offered to perform the new work on condition that Tchaikovsky make sweeping changes. But Tchaikovsky was less than enthusiastic about outside interference (Balakirev's unwanted suggestions about corrections to his *Romeo and Juliet Overture* had led to a coolness between the two in 1870, although Tchaikovsky later adopted Balakirev's suggestions). He dedicated the piano concerto to Sergey Taneyev but changed his mind again and offered it instead to Hans von Bülow, doubtless with a mind to seeing the work performed outside Russia.

The German Hans von Bülow had no qualms about accepting the concerto and he gave the premiere in October 1875 whilst on a concert tour of

the U.S.A. Afterwards he relayed details of the successful premiere to Tchaikovsky by telegram, probably the first time Boston and Moscow had been connected in this way. The Russian premiere took place in Petersburg and in Moscow it was conducted by Nikolay Rubinstein (to atone for his earlier remarks?) with Taneyev as soloist. The following year Tchaikovsky met Rubinstein half-way and sanctioned alterations prior to the second edition, published in time for the first London performance.

One of the alterations concerned the piano chords that follow the famous horn motif at the beginning of the work. It is often remarked that Tchaikovsky's grandiose and striking opening fails to reappear during the course of the concerto (likewise the opening motif of the *Violin Concerto*). Following the arresting opening the meter changes to duple time as a jaunty theme, based on a Ukrainian folk-song, emerges. This alternates with a rather melancholy sighing motif heard initially from the woodwind instruments. The beautiful slow movement features a gentle flute melody played above pizzicato strings embellished by the piano. This is contrasted with a scherzo section. The finale opens with a Russian folk-tune followed by a sweeping string melody. These two themes hold sway in a movement which gives ample opportunity for dynamic virtuosity from the soloist.

James Murray

NOTES ON THE ARTIST

Van Cliburn (1934-2013) was an international musical icon for over five decades, arguably the most famous classical musician to have ever emerged from the United States.

At the height of the Cold War in 1958, Van Cliburn — at the time a 23-year-old — was America's participant in the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, a contest that had been planned to demonstrate Soviet cultural superiority on the heels of the country's launch of Sputnik. Among the judges was pianist Sviatoslav Richter, who was so impressed by Cliburn that he gave him the maximum possible "perfect" score; later Richter recalled weeping with joy while listening to Cliburn play Rachmaninoff's enormously challenging *Piano Concerto No. 3*. The judges scored Cliburn as the clear winner at the conclusion of the final concerto round voting – which presented them

with a quandary and crisis. The judges asked permission of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to give first prize to an American. "Is he the best?" Khrushchev asked. "Then give him the prize!"

Cliburn returned home to a ticker-tape parade in New York City, the only time the honor has been bestowed on a musician. RCA Victor signed him to an exclusive contract, and his first recording for the label, Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, was actually the second recording he made of the work; the first, released here, was made by Melodiya in Moscow just after the Tchaikovsky Competition. Cliburn's RCA recording of the concerto became the best-selling classical album in the world for more than a decade. His appearances generated record-breaking concert ticket sales at venues such as New York's Carnegie Hall and Madison Square Garden, Chicago's Grant Park, and Los Angeles' Hollywood Bowl. Cliburn performed for every President of the United States from Harry Truman to Barack Obama, as well as heads of state and royalty from around the world.

Cliburn performed and recorded regularly through the 1970s, but in 1978, following the deaths of his father and of his manager, Sol Hurok, he took a step back from public life. He remerged in 1987, accepting an invitation to perform at the White House for President Ronald Reagan and Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, and afterward was invited to open the 100th anniversary season of Carnegie Hall. He embarked on a 16-city tour in 1994, commencing with a performance of the Tchaikovsky concerto at the Hollywood Bowl. He continued to perform into the first decade of the 21st century. On August 27, 2012, Cliburn's publicist revealed that the pianist was being treated for advanced bone cancer and "resting comfortably at home" in Fort Worth, where he received around-the-clock care. Cliburn died on February 27, 2013, at the age of 78.

Over the course of his lifetime, he was honored with a multitude of accolades, among them Kennedy Center Honors, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and the United States' Presidential Medal of Freedom and National Medal of Arts. In 1962, a dedicated group of Fort Worth volunteers held the First Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in his honor; the competition is now widely recognized as one of the most prestigious in the world. Cliburn received the Kennedy Center Honors on December 2, 2001. He was awarded the Presidential

Medal of Freedom on July 23, 2003,[28] by President George W. Bush, and, on September 20, 2004, the Russian Order of Friendship, the highest civilian awards of the two countries.

Kirill Kondrashin (1914-81), one of the great figures of musical life during the Soviet era, was born in Moscow into a family of musicians. At the age of 14 he decided to become a conductor. From 1931-36, Kondrashin studied under Boris Khaikin at the Moscow Conservatory, going on to gain conducting experience at the Malyi Opera Theatre in Leningrad. By 1943 Kondrashin had been appointed permanent conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow (remaining there until 1956), and his performance of Shostakovich's *Symphony No.1* attracted the composer's attention – and led to the formation of a lifelong friendship.

Kondrashin was the conductor for American pianist Van Cliburn in the final round of the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958. Following the competition, Kondrashin and Cliburn made this studio recording of Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, and shortly thereafter Kondrashin toured the United States with Cliburn, becoming the first Soviet conductor to visit America since the beginning of the Cold War. Together they performed and recorded Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 3* and Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1* for RCA Victor; along with those sessions, Kondrashin also made recordings of select Russian repertoire with an "all-star" orchestra of New York freelancers and members of the city's major orchestras.

From 1960-75, Kondrashin was principal conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. With that orchestra he made many noteworthy recordings for Melodiya, including the first complete cycle of Dmitri Shostakovich's symphonies as well as most of the symphonies of Gustav Mahler in their first recordings for the official Soviet record label.

Kondrashin was granted political asylum in the Netherlands whilst on tour in 1978. He took the post of Permanent Guest Conductor of Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1978, and remained in that position until his death from a heart attack in early 1981, on the same day he had conducted Mahler's First Symphony with the North German Radio Symphony Orchestra.

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