



Condoleezza Rice Celebrates the Life of Pianist Van Cliburn

by [Condoleezza Rice](#) Mar 1, 2013 1:36 PM EST

Sometimes a man and the times come together in a compelling way—and that’s what pianist Van Cliburn did when he swept the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, writes Condoleezza Rice.

The [death of Van Cliburn](#) this week marks the passing of a wonderful musician and a very special man. Those of us who were lucky enough to know him will forever celebrate his gentle spirit. He was a kind and generous soul.

Texas pianist Van Cliburn performs to a packed audience in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory in Moscow in April 1958 during the first International Tchaikovsky Competition, which he won. (Van Cliburn Foundation, via AP)

Yet it is no exaggeration to say this lanky Texan with prodigious talent fired a huge salvo in the thawing of the Cold War. His gold medal performance at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958, at the age of 23, sent shock waves through the musical world and the world of international politics.

As time passes, it is hard to fathom the degree to which the Soviet Union’s cultural machine, like its sports juggernaut, was a part of its claim to greatness. Moscow selected its artists practically when they were in kindergarten and gave them the best in instruction and preparation, expecting them to dominate the world’s consciousness in return and affirm the superiority of the communist system. “Artist of the Soviet Union” was a revered and lucrative title.

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Cliburn had none of that state backing, of course, just talent, perseverance, and commitment. Like his countrymen in so many fields of endeavor, he was a free agent, not an agent of the state. To their credit, the Soviet judges rewarded his musicianship—looking past the fact that he was an American.

Cliburn would most certainly blush, maybe even bristle, at this description of his role in history. For him, it was all about the music. But sometimes a man and the times come together in a compelling way. Both the clear and penetrating sound of his touch and the sensation of that gold medal night in Moscow will live on and resound through history. Van Cliburn will be missed but not forgotten.