

Saturday Review

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Ralph Votapek—"technical assurance, musicianship, and stylistic authority."

THE VAN CLIBURN CONTEST

By PAUL HUME

FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

FORT WORTH's leading hotel, the Texas, carries on its marquee the line, "Where the West Begins." Citizens of the city affectionately refer to it as "Cowtown" but they do so with a justifiable pride that its stock yards have, within the past generation, been bulwarked by a growing appreciation for the arts.

The two weeks during which the Cliburn International Quadrennial Piano Competition recently took over a large part of Fort Worth's time and attention provided one eye-opener after another for the forty-six pianists, ten jurors, and other observers visiting the city. The line, often seen in books describing famous paintings, "from the private collection of . . ." took on heightened meaning as we walked through the Kay Kimbell home whose walls hold marvels such as Franz Hals's "The Rommel-Pot Player," and his "Laughing Boy with Flute," superlative Rembrandts, Rubenses, and Goyas, Gainsboroughs, Romneys, Corots and Bouchers, beautiful child portraits by Greuze, and El Greco's "St. John."

Another home, that of the Robert Windfohrs, has a staggering collection

of Chagall, Picasso, Matisse, Dove and Marin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Dufy, Utrillo, and Klee.

The vigorous Texas city is also the home of Texas Christian University, in whose Ed Landreth Auditorium all twelve sessions of the Cliburn Competition, plus the closing recital by its top winner, were presented. Dr. Frank Hughes, dean of TCU's School of Fine Arts, turned over the facilities of the building, complete with artists' room, specially prepared press room, and 1200-seat auditorium. Representing his university, which was one of the four groups sponsoring the competition, Dean Hughes was constantly on the alert to offer every useful assistance.

It was just after midnight on the morning of Sunday, October 7, two hours after TCU's Horned Frogs had gone down in defeat before the University of Arkansas's Razorbacks in the football stadium four blocks from Landreth Auditorium, that Leopold Mannes, chairman of the ten-man jury, read out the name of Ralph Votapek as winner of the \$10,000 prize that is only part of the reward to which the top man in this Texas-sized competition is heir. Votapek, who had spent the evening at the football game, where he saw Cliburn made an honorary member

of the TCU marching band, seemed genuinely surprised at the verdict. His victory was not, however, a surprise to many musicians in the audiences and to the other contestants.

It had been a grueling competition, operating on the highest standards from its first announcements through every aspect of its two weeks of preliminaries, semi-finals, and finals.

Aimed at encouraging "world-wide interest in artistic piano playing and further to foster more friendly relations among the nations," it drew contestants from seventeen countries. It was the first international musical competition held in this country to which the Soviet Union sent entries. In addition to this, one of the ten jurors, who were from six countries, was the distinguished Russian pianist and teacher Lev Oborin. The other jurors came from Japan, England, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States.

At one time over a hundred contestants had signed up for the contest. Dropouts came as the arduous demands of the repertoire became plain, with the largest number occurring immediately after each entrant received his copy of Lee Hoiby's "Capriccio on Five Notes." This work, commissioned especially for the Cliburn Competition, was

required of every performer and while highly pianistic and not unduly difficult, it discouraged a number from traveling to Fort Worth, even though Nieman-Marcus of Dallas offered a special prize, a \$500 gold wrist watch for its best performance. This, incidentally, was the only evidence before, during, or after the competition that anyone in Dallas even knew that Fort Worth existed. The Dallas press ignored the contest to a degree that surpasses most records for provincialism.

The members of the jury included five pianists actively engaged in the concert world: Lili Kraus, Yara Burnette, Jorge Bolet, Leonard Pennario, and Oborin. The other five are intimately associated with various aspects of music: Luis Herrera de la Fuente, conductor of the National Symphony of Mexico, Rudolph Ganz, Leopold Mannes, Angelo Eagon, music advisor to the USIA, and Motonari Iguchi, head of Tokyo's Toho School of Music.

Twenty-five men and twenty-one women journeyed to play in Fort Worth. They ranged in age from the contest's lower limit of eighteen—Hiroko Nakamura who won ninth place prize of \$500—to its upper edge of twenty-seven—Sergio Varella Cid of Portugal, and Russia's Mikhail Voskresenski, who captured the third prize of \$2000.

The judges were unanimous in several opinions of considerable interest. First of all, they agreed that where contestants failed to measure up to expected standards, they did so in playing Beethoven sonatas and in the music of Chopin. Interestingly enough, no Beethoven was required until the finals. But among the works required in the preliminaries, the contestants could choose any Haydn, Mozart, or Bee-

thoven sonata. All but seven chose one of the larger Beethoven sonatas, and in so doing, most of them exposed what the judges labeled as a youthful inability or failure to understand the essential character of the music.

The other area in which the judges found many of the pianists lacking was that of chamber music. The Cliburn Competition, for the first time among the major contests, required each competitor to play either the F Minor Quintet or the B Major Trio of Brahms, assisted by the quartet in residence at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Some of the pianists admitted after the contest that it was their very first performance of any chamber music.

ALL in all, however, the Cliburn contest proved its worth in the caliber not only of its first-place winner, but in the quality of many who participated, and especially the promise for the future of several of them. It was the consensus of opinion that second place winner—\$5000—Nikolai Petrov has a phenomenal, indeed flamboyant technique of prodigious scope. At nineteen he seems likely to become one of the major European pianists within the next few years. Voskresenski at twenty-seven is mature, highly poetic, and about through with competitions. He builds up so great a store of nervous tension that he is not at his best under the strain of two weeks' intensive rivalry. Those who have heard him in recital say he provides endless satisfaction in extremely musical ways.

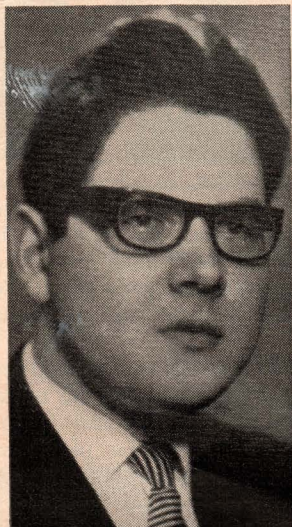
Cécile Ousset, France's glamorous entrant, has certain qualities characteristic of other French pianists. Her superb facility and control are admirable but the cool temperature of most of

her playing prevents sustained interest. She was a sound choice for the fourth prize of \$1000.

Early promise in the competition, which many jurors thought remained unfulfilled in later sessions, was displayed by Arthur Fennimore, twenty, a former Serkin pupil. There were, however, many among the audience and visiting musicians who felt that his playing was eminently musical, his chamber music superb, and his future as bright as that of any in the competition. Fennimore won the Nieman-Marcus watch and the seventh-place prize of \$500. He, Varella Cid, and Japan's Hironaka, were the three whom the judges rated high enough to stretch the stipulated number for the finals from six to nine.

All three of Japan's entrants placed in the semi-finals, as did all four Soviet Union contestants. Two from Japan and two from the Soviet Union went into the finals. Quite clearly Japan has placed itself among the leading countries in point of turning out well-disciplined, musicianly artists. Miss Hiroko Nakamura, remembered for her lovely playing of the Chopin E Minor Concerto with the Tokyo Philharmonic several seasons back, divided with winner Votapek the Cliburn prize of \$600 for the best performance of chamber music. Making an unforgettable picture picture in a white kimono overlaid with flowers of blue and red, bound by a great, gold obi, Miss Nakamura might have placed higher than ninth had a sudden illness not kept her from finishing the finals.

It was Ralph Votapek, however, who, alone among the nine finalists, consistently combined that balance of technical assurance, musicianship, and
(Continued on page 61)



Nikolai Petrov



Mikhail Voskresenski



Cecile Ousset



Arthur C. Fennimore

Van Cliburn Contest

Continued from page 44

stylistic authority which the judges constantly sought. Leopold Mannes read a statement prepared by the jury just before the final winners were announced. He said, "In making the decisions involving all the prize awards the jury wishes to make it clear that each contestant has been considered not only from the standpoint of his performances during the past two weeks but also of his overall talent, capacity, and potential." Upon such a basis, Votapek emerged as the one candidate fully qualified for the heavy responsibilities that victory in this competition brings.

Milton Katims, conductor of the Seattle Symphony, flew down to Fort Worth to conduct the Fort Worth Symphony in the finals. He gave contestants and orchestra alike a sense of confidence and security that added much to the closing rounds. Katims told me he hoped that the winner of so important and impressive a contest would be ready for the demands sure to be made upon him. A partial answer to this question came from Rosina Lhevinne, who was Cliburn's teacher at the time of his famous victory in Moscow as she has been Votapek's during the past year. She says Votapek is prepared, and soundly, to play thirty concertos.

In looking over the notes I made while listening to Votapek in the preliminaries, semi-finals, and final sessions, I find these comments: "Musical feeling, delicacy and nuance, very expressive, immense power, a sense of the long line, regard for the form of the work." In short, a high order of pianism. At twenty-three, which was the average age of the field of the contestants, Votapek is an attractive, blond young man from Milwaukee, mild-mannered and modest offstage, yet highly personable on it. He gives every sign of being now, and increasingly in the years ahead, a superb musician whose playing should satisfy the highest demands. With contracts from Hurok in this hemisphere and Van Wyck in Europe, with solo and orchestral engagements awaiting him in Carnegie Hall and London's Royal Festival Hall, and with an RCA Victor contract signed before he was proclaimed winner, he looks to me like a young man whose head will not be turned, and who can be counted on to continue to broaden his musical knowledge and outlook.

He shines in the very areas where the judges found most candidates lacking: Beethoven sonatas, Chopin, and chamber music. His name, soon to become widely known throughout the

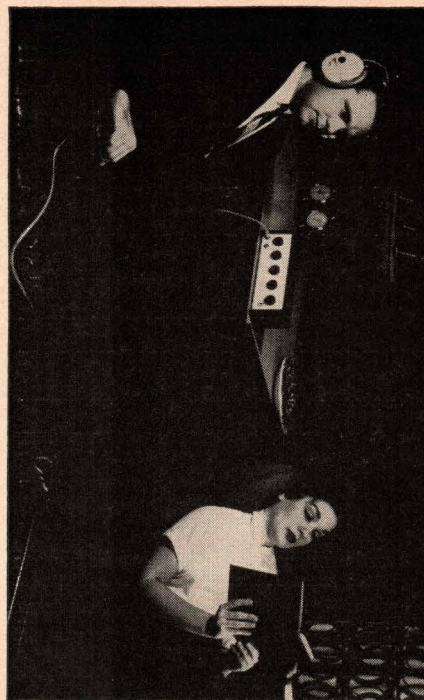
world of music, will reflect great credit on the competition whose top prize he is the first to win.

What about future Cliburn Competitions? Already Fort Worth is planning for them. Grace Ward Lankford, whose dreamchild the Competition was and is, wore herself out by the endless time she gave to its details, but it is improbable that the contest could ever have begun or been so successfully carried through without her. When one considers the government interest in and support of such affairs as the Brussels and Moscow contests, it is even more astonishing that a lone Texas woman of imagination and executive ability should have been able to bring off this event. One experienced New York observer commented that neither the Mitropoulos nor the Leventritt contests ever ran so smoothly and efficiently.

This year's jury operated in a spirit of cooperative understanding and mutual appreciation, seeking always to find the most musical elements in the players. When the inevitable crises arose, the generalship of jury chairman Mannes proved invaluable in bringing about peaceful, constructive solutions.

Another time certain ambiguous wording concerning the number of entrants to be admitted to semi-finals and finals will no doubt be made clear, avoiding this year's decisions to stretch the semi-finals from twelve to sixteen, the finals from six to nine. Adequate rehearsal time with the orchestra will be arranged in advance, having been set up this time only through the insistence of the entire jury. A string quartet of the highest caliber must be engaged another time so that contestants will not be hampered by inferior playing. The chamber music repertoire will no doubt be altered to give a choice between two composers instead of two works by a single one.

Fort Worth is solidly on music's international map by virtue of the strong community support displayed throughout the contest, the unparalleled hospitality extended to all who visited the city, and the eminently satisfactory musical results of its first competition. City officials and private citizens admit the city will never again be the same as it was before the contest began. For two weeks it became an international center where one talked in French with Japanese judge Iguchi, in German with the Russian Oborin. Pianists from around the world lived in Fort Worth's homes and shopped in its stores. Leading American contenders turned pages for their rivals from Japan, Russia and Portugal. Fort Worth today understands the world better than it did a month ago and the world has a new and warm admiration for Fort Worth.



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