

Saturday Review

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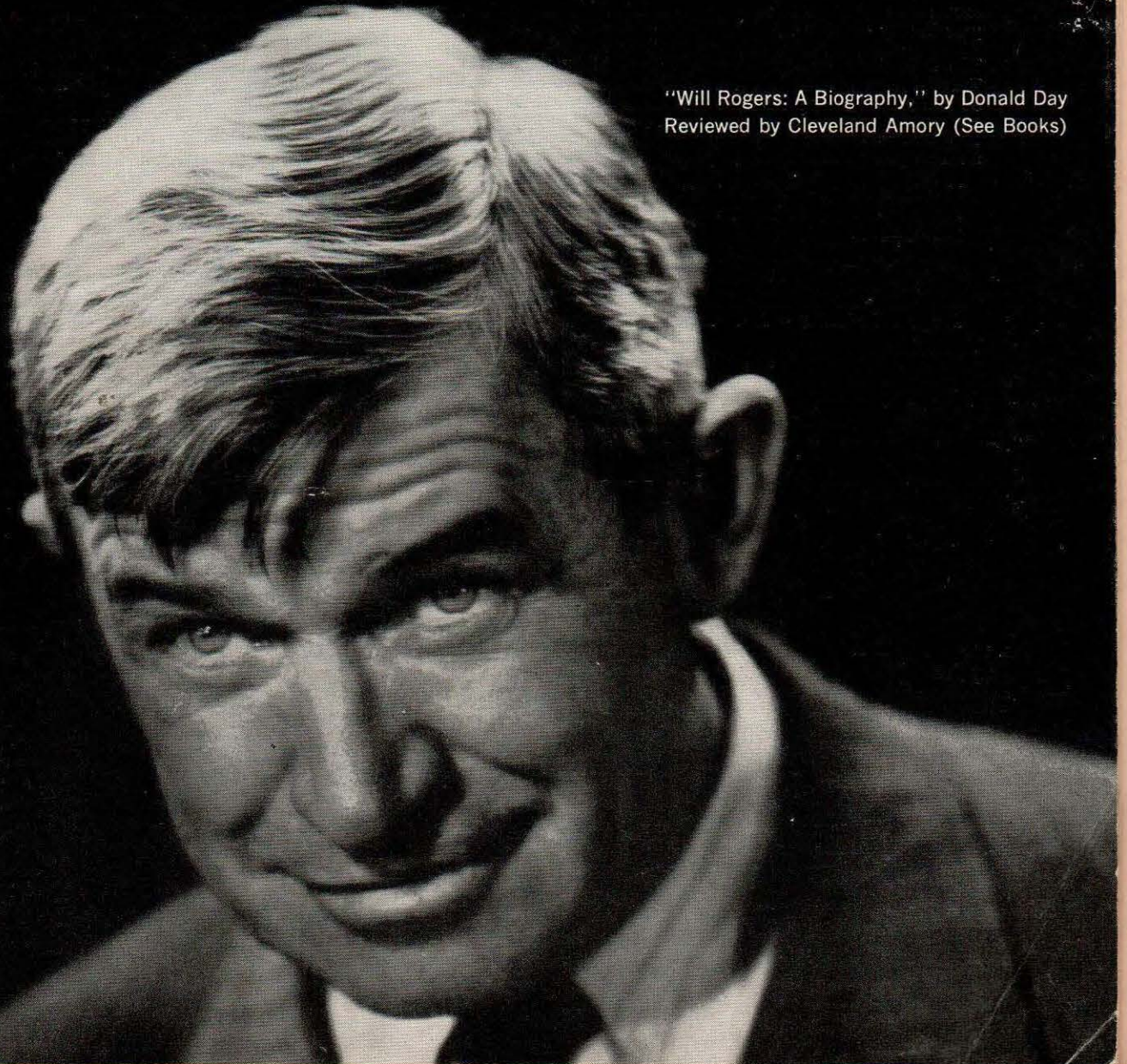


PIANO COMPETITIONS: TALENT HUNT OR SPORT?

A Preview of the Van Cliburn International at Fort Worth

By Carl Battaglia

"Will Rogers: A Biography," by Donald Day
Reviewed by Cleveland Amory (See Books)





—Eugene Cook.

Van Cliburn—"a measure of the result that can accrue to a competition winner in the right place at the right time. . . ."

SR/RECORDINGS

AUGUST 25, 1962

PIANO COMPETITIONS: TALENT HUNT
OR SPORT?

by *Carl Battaglia* 31

ECOLE NICOISE

by *Martin Bernheimer* 33

DEBUSSY ON DISC: 1912-1962

by *Jan Holeman* 34

RECORDINGS IN REVIEW

by *the Editor* 36

GILLESPIE IN CONCERT

by *Martin Williams* 41

ON TO FORT WORTH

PIANO COMPETITIONS: TALENT HUNT OR SPORT?

By CARL BATTAGLIA

BELA BARTOK probably spoke for a good many musicians when he said, "Competitions are for horses, not artists." Nevertheless, it is a fact that more young performers than ever before—particularly pianists—are availing themselves of the opportunities afforded by this "sport." Within recent months, two of the most famous competitions (the American Leventritt and the Russian Tchaikovsky) have given prominence to a number of pianists from Belgium, France, Russia, England, and the United States. Within a few weeks the center of attention will shift to Texas, where the first International Quadrennial Piano Competition named after—who else?—Van Cliburn will dangle a series of prizes (including an unprecedented \$10,000

for the top winner) before a collection of competitors even more varied than what is suggested by the five languages in which the "Règles du Concours" of the competition's brochure are printed.

The chief function of any competition is threefold: to find, develop, and promote new talent. Sometimes, however, promotion takes precedence over the other two functions, as in the recent Tchaikovsky Competition, in which the Russians set up the considerably well-developed Vladimir Ashkenazy—who had toured this country several years before with resounding success—as a standard by which others could match themselves. England's John Ogdon was graciously admitted to a co-winner's status with Ashkenazy, who nevertheless emerged unexcelled.

Customarily, the means for developing and promoting talent are assured

even before finding the talent. Depending on the number and resourcefulness of the competition's sponsors, substantial money prizes may be augmented by appearances with orchestras here and abroad, a recording contract, a managerial affiliation, and even—as in the case of Cliburn's success in Moscow—front-page publicity in the nation's press. More recently, when Agustin Anievas was named winner of the top prize in a competition designed to honor Dimitri Mitropoulos, he was presented with a check for \$5,000, a managerial contract with Hurok Attractions, and an opportunity to record for Columbia. Susan Starr of Philadelphia (who was among the finalists with Anievas) didn't win first prize in Moscow, but her runner-up status will give her a long lead on other twenty-year-old pianists of either sex.

THUS Bartók's dictum may have to be amended, if not revalued. Like the Grand Prix and the Derby, the musical *concours* attracts not only competitors but devotees. In Europe especially, where France, Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland have a round of competitions predating World War II, queuing up for seats to the public sessions is not unusual. In this country it has been more the custom to conduct competitions in private, but the clear advantages of the European procedure, for purposes of promotion and publicity, have initiated a trend toward open awards, openly arrived at.

Yet this is not a trend without a countertrend. The 1960 venture of the Leventritt Award, in which no winner was designated after a lengthy public session in Carnegie Hall by the three finalists, caused a return this year to the nonpublic procedure. This willingness to seek the most suitable means, trend or not, for the accomplishment of its objectives marks the Leventritt auditions as among the finest in the

world. To quibble with the manner in which the judges conduct their penetrating analysis of talent is to argue the validity of an x-ray plate. The precision with which they are able to delineate the essentials of a performer under consideration is as remarkable as their selection of the repertoire by which the end is accomplished. For the Foundation is dedicated to the perpetuation of a specific high level of piano performance. Its contestants do not compete against each other but against an established standard of concert performance. Therefore the top prize, which includes appearances with major orchestras as well as a cash award of \$1,000, is bestowed only when the jury is convinced that the performer belongs with the major pianists now performing. To this end, a series of smaller awards and engagements with less-prominent orchestras are also awarded in the hope that the experience thus acquired will further the development of such talents with a view to producing a top winner another year.

Michel Block is a case in point. In 1960, he was among those given a cash consideration, when no top winner was selected by the Leventritt jury. Then this year he walked off happily with the first prize, and all its perquisites. However, it may be noted that, in 1960, when Block, Kenneth Amada, and Bela Szilagi were told before an audience of 2,500 in Carnegie Hall that none was "fully equipped for a professional career," the letdown was a public one. His success this time was shared only with the persons present at the final session in the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and with those who read the published accounts of the following day. How much better it would have been had Block's recent success been as prominent as his earlier letdown!

However, the problem of awards is not peculiar to the Leventritt Competition. Before holding auditions, most prominent competitions establish a set of graded prizes to be awarded to the finalists. A convenient procedure in some kinds of competition, it has its shortcomings in the arts. On some occasions even excellent players with considerable public success have been eliminated because the number of prizes stipulated has not matched the number of quality performers. In the recent Mitropoulos Competition, for example, such performers as Daniel Pollack, Samuel Lipman, Tania Ashot, Zita Carno, and Kenneth Amada did not even reach the final round. Indeed, at the last moment, the judges undertook to tighten the slack in awards by adding two special prizes.

This convenient gesture, while helpful, can hardly be the safeguard of justice that it is purported to be. It merely tries to justify the structuring of a rigid system of prescribed awards. It doesn't answer the question of how to set up the administration of stipulated awards before the recipients have been examined. How can anyone be sure in advance that four contenders may not tie for first prize and thus be equally eligible for the prize money? Or that no more than one or two will merit cash prizes, or that twelve may not deserve special awards? It seems impractical that a committee of judges be restricted to predetermined awards which will, in any way, influence their decision before the fact, and ultimately plunge the jury into a paroxysm of hair splitting.

It is in these circumstances that Bartók's dictum may have a broader application than it might seem to have on the surface. Human factors abound in the confrontation of competitors and judges, where considerations more subtle than fine "points" (on which, for example, judges of dogs proceed) are involved. There have been cases where a minority opinion among jury members has deplored the implication of a wide chasm separating the musical abilities of a first-prize winner and his downgraded competitor. At the 1960 Chopin Competition in Warsaw, judge Artur Rubinstein violently disagreed with the jury's relatively low opinion of one performer and gave his own special prize to the tenth place contender. (It happened to be Michel Block, this year's Leventritt winner.) And it is a moot point whether the Chopin jury of 1955, which decided in the favor of Adam Harasiewicz over Vladimir Ashkenazy by a fraction of a point, really had a significant margin of difference on which to judge.

If methods are subject to criticism,



—Sovfoto.

1962 Tchaikovsky co-winners Vladimir Ashkenazy and John Ogdon at a reception with Chairman Khrushchev.

how much greater, then, is the need for complete objectivity on the part of the judges appointed to administer them. The 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition is a minor but graphic illustration. The mesmerized Gilels, who left his seat with arms outstretched during the finals of that famous round of tests, and embraced Cliburn after his playing of the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto, compromised considerably the decision of his fellow judges—not to mention influencing the audience, who thunderously demanded that Cliburn be declared the first-prize winner. Emotional, heart warming, and exciting it may have been, but it was also an action that skeptics might have taken into consideration in judging Cliburn's preeminence over his fellow competitors. This is not to suggest that the American should not have won, or to imply that decisions ever will, or should, be received with complete agreement by all involved. It is more by way of suggesting that a jury, like Caesar's wife, ought to be above suspicion. There should be no occasion to doubt its adherence to elementary and universally recognized judicial procedure.

FROM Cliburn in 1958 to the Van Cliburn Competition in Fort Worth in 1962 is a measure of the results that can accrue to a competition winner in the right place at the right time—and, of course, with the right abilities. If, as many fear from the required repertory, the sponsors hope to discover a giant of virtuosity in the mold of the competition's illustrious namesake, pianists will be faced with a repetition of a situation that occurred in 1948. The Rachmaninoff Fund undertook to produce a competition winner who would merit being placed in context with the pianistic genius of the great Russian. Their findings, however, did not encourage a long life for the competition.

In issuing its invitation for pianists to converge on Fort Worth late in September, the sponsors are complimenting the locale with the largest sum of prize money ever offered in such a contest: \$10,000 paid in four equal installments to the top winner. Second place is worth \$3,000, third place \$2,000, and even sixth place carries a \$500 reward. This is in keeping with the tradition that Texans have money and are not averse to sponsoring the arts. What has never been quite so clear before is that they insist on value for that money.

The winner must possess a technical keyboard equipment of "virtuoso pro-

(Continued on page 39)

Ecole Niçoise

NICE.

AS THE commercial epidemic of summer festivals continues to spread throughout Europe, the Côte d'Azur is keeping pace. Menton and Monte Carlo already have elaborate concert series that come close to warranting the "festival" title, even though they seldom stray from the beaten paths in repertory or roster. In Nice, however, a festival has arisen that concentrates on education as much as on performance. If tourist attraction is intended, it is of secondary importance.

Such a policy, though familiar to visitors to Tanglewood or Aspen, is practically unknown to the European festivalgoer. It gives Nice a gratifyingly individual musical profile.

The nucleus of activities here is the *Académie Internationale d'Eté*, the brainchild of composer-conductor-educator-musicologist Fernand Oubradous. Having spent five years on the faculty of the Salzburg Mozarteum, Oubradous knew exactly which policies he wanted to import from the Austrian mecca, and which he must avoid. Music making would have to be more important than money making.

He engaged the services of some of the finest musicians in France, making it clear that their primary function would be teaching. The setting seemed ideal. For classes there was the lavish Villa Paradiso, once owned by the Rothschilds; for concerts there were the chapel and courtyard of the medieval Cimiez cloister. And, as an incidental lure, the Nice Opera put on special performances at a nearby outdoor arena.

The Nice faculty speaks for itself. The string department alone lists such names as Loewenguth, Pasquier, Navarra, Benedetti, and Odnoposoff (Ricardo). Among the pianists in residence are Jean-Marie Darré and Magda Tagliaferro. Also on hand are dancer-choreographer Serge Lifar; conductors Hans Swarowsky, Jacques Pernoo, and Louis Fourestier; flutist Jean-Pierre Rampal; guitarists Ida Presti and Alexander Lagoya; composer-pianist Alexander Tcherepnin; and organist Pierre Cochereau of Notre Dame.

The value of such artists was amply demonstrated last month at one of the frequent cloister serenades. The all-faculty chamber orchestra proved itself of extraordinary caliber by any festival

standard. And the programming was more imaginative than that of most better-publicized ventures.

The concert opened with Oubradous's stylish edition of a suite from Rameau's "Les Indes galantes." Next came the only standard item of the evening, Bach's E major Violin Concerto, played by Odnoposoff. For contrast, there was the D major Symphony of J. C. Bach, whose Mozart-like freshness came as a revelation. Tcherepnin's tight-knit and witty Concerto da Camera (1924) reminded one of this composer's unwarranted neglect in certain quarters. The only weak link, and even this an unhackneyed one, turned out to be a new concerto for trumpet and piano by P. P. Bauzin. Monsieur Bauzin, who won the *Académie's* composition award last summer, disclosed more fidelity to Ravel and Gershwin than individuality.

IT IS hardly surprising that the *Académie*, now in its fourth summer, attracts as many as 450 students from thirty-two different nations (twenty from the United States). The size and widespread geographical representation of the student body is perhaps best explained by the unusual administrative policy. Fees are ridiculously low by any standard (courses range from \$20 to \$60, and board and room cost approximately \$3 a day). There are no entrance requirements and no final exams, though the superior students are asked to give public recitals at the end of the six-week session.

One question only the wisdom of the no-entrance-requirement rule. It is disconcerting to observe Magda Tagliaferro wasting her time trying to convey subtleties of Beethoven interpretation to a student not equipped to grasp them. It is frustrating to watch Hans Swarowsky spend an entire session teaching neophyte conductors to beat "4" in the "Zauberflöte" overture. Oubradous contends that there are merits in so democratic a system, that the beginners are eventually separated from the near-professionals.

There can be little doubt that students at any stage of development can benefit from working with famous musicians, just as they can learn immeasurably from listening to them perform. Whether the teachers are being used to optimum effect, however, is another matter. —MARTIN BERNHEIMER.

Piano Competitions

Continued from page 33

portion," according to the bill of particulars governing the choice of a Chopin etude to be played in the preliminary phase. In addition, he should be able to play repertory illustrative of his affinity with the bright clavier articulation of early classical players (Scarlatti), the pianistic prowess of the dynamic bravura player (Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin), and the atomic percussive impact of the contemporary dynamo-performer (Scherzo and Fugue of Barber's Opus 26 Sonata, first performed by Vladimir Horowitz). Included in the semifinal phase of the competition is a requirement for chamber music on the scope of Brahms's B major Trio or F minor Quintet, plus one of the four MacDowell sonatas, a composition by a contemporary of the contestant's nationality, and a "large and important work of the nineteenth century." Finalists will match merits in terms of the Beethoven Concertos Nos. 3 or 4, the Prokofiev No. 3, or the Rachmaninoff Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini. Here they will have the assistance of the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Milton Katims.

This is a tall order, with perhaps implicit contradictions. Certainly the pianist who fills it will herald the emergence of a new cross-blended breed of pianist and the inception of a revolutionary and exciting era in keyboard virtuosity. But Fort Worth knows what it wants and is going after it by offering rewards beyond the monetary, which should make it a worth-while venture for any qualified performer here or abroad—a Carnegie Hall recital, engagements with orchestras, a contract for concert appearances in Latin America, Canada, and the United States under S. Hurok's banner, a concert in the Royal Festival Hall in England (with orchestra) under the sponsorship of Wilfrid Van Wyck, with a European tour to follow, and an engagement in Mexico City.

Thus to perpetuate past errors in the management of competitions whose demands and rewards were not so extraordinary would be a disservice to art and a corruption of Texas justice. Being energetic, new, and idealistic, the planning committee can hazard new roads to higher horizons, and perhaps, even to mistakes which will be honest and unconventional. It has, certainly, an opportunity to establish standards of procedure and quality which will make the Quadrennial Competition in Fort Worth as much a measure of the highest achievements in its field as the Olympics are in theirs.

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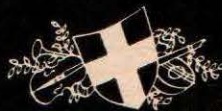
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