



## **Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War**

*Nigel Cliff*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online ➔](#)

# **Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War**

*Nigel Cliff*

## **Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War**

Nigel Cliff

Gripping narrative nonfiction that tells the dramatic story of a remarkable young Texan pianist, Van Cliburn, who played his way through the wall of fear built by the Cold War, won the hearts of the American and Russian people, and eased tensions between two superpowers on the brink of nuclear war.

In 1958, an unheralded twenty-three-year-old piano prodigy from Texas named Van Cliburn traveled to Moscow to compete in the First International Tchaikovsky Competition. The Soviets had no intention of bestowing their coveted prize on an unknown American; a Russian pianist had already been chosen to win. Yet when the gangly Texan with the shy grin took the stage and began to play, he instantly captivated an entire nation.

The Soviet people were charmed by Van Cliburn's extraordinary talent, passion, and fresh-faced innocence, but it was his palpable love for the music that earned their devotion; for many, he played more like a Russian than their own musicians. As enraptured crowds mobbed Cliburn's performances, pressure mounted to award him the competition prize. "Is he the best?" Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev demanded of the judges. "In that case . . . give him the prize!"

Adored by millions in the USSR, Cliburn returned to a thunderous hero's welcome in the USA and became, for a time, an ambassador of hope for two dangerously hostile superpowers. In this thrilling, impeccably researched account, Nigel Cliff recreates the drama and tension of the Cold War era, and brings into focus the gifted musician and deeply compelling figure whose music would temporarily bridge the divide between two dangerously hostile powers.

## **Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War Details**

Date : Published September 20th 2016 by Harper

ISBN :

Author : Nigel Cliff

Format : Kindle Edition 464 pages

Genre : History, Music, Nonfiction, Biography, Cultural, Russia



[Download Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War.pdf](#)



[Read Online Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War.pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War Nigel Cliff**

---

## **From Reader Review Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story-How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War for online ebook**

### **Fred says**

Fascinating bit a dual-history, both a biography of Van Cliburn and a treatise on American-Soviet relations post-World War II and how they two intertwined.

I knew that Van Cliburn won the 1st Tchaikovsky Piano/Violin competition (1958), but didn't understand the cultural and political significance or context. Nor did I know that his mother and his primary teacher at Juilliard had roots deep in the Russian musical past. And I had no idea of Van Cliburn's immediate and continued popularity in Russia (and in the States, for that matter). For a time he rivaled Elvis.

This is well researched and well written and completely absorbing.

Here is a performance of Van Cliburn playing Moscow Nights. Many years later, when President Reagan asked him to come and perform at the White House for Premier and Mrs Gorbachev, this is the piece that moved them to tears.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkxSg...>

---

### **Pamela says**

"[Grandfather] told me: 'Politics is a great art, but it is divisive. Great classical music is for everyone all over the world.'"

Robustly researched, meticulously compiled and masterfully written, Nigel Cliff has brought a lesser known, but pertinent facet of the cold-war to light, framing it within the humanitarian lens of music. It's as rich in detail as it is compellingly readable. A book that both fascinates and informs.

Musically astute connoisseurs of classical music who equally enjoy minutia enhancers, history, sociology, and politics on a studious level will most likely find this a highly satisfying tome. The shear magnitude of research and mastery of writing compels me to give this no less than five stars. But I will be frank: it isn't a quick, effortless read, by any stretch of the imagination. It is broadly cast and encompassing. Patience is encouraged. Truly though, Van Cliburn's story - his boy-man innocence, musical genius, social/pop-culture/humanitarian influences, eccentricities, and his astounding twentieth-century popularity - is worth reading about.

4.5 rounded up:

FIVE \*\*\*\*\* Masterfully Written, Historically Symphonic, Cold War History \*\*\*\*\* STARS

---

### **Kathleen says**

Great writing and a wonderful, heartwarming story that seems unbelievable (though true) from this remove of nearly 50 years. I was only 8 years old when Van Cliburn won the 1st Tchaikovsky Music Competition, and hadn't even started piano lessons. But I do remember the Cold War, if through a child's eyes, and as a classical pianist I loved all the details about Van's childhood and education at Juilliard, and all the behind the scenes stories of the competition and the other competitors. The book begins with the death of Stalin, and is as much the story of the Cold War as it is of music. I learned a lot. Scary times, though in a different way from today.

---

### **Cindy says**

I loved reading some of this, as Van Cliburn was my freshman theory professor's cousin. Many of the details were fascinating, encouraging, and/or amazing. However, I neither appreciated nor enjoyed some of the other details the author included. Perhaps I'm too close to the subject (knowing his cousin and other family members), but I do not enjoy reading things that I know the biographee would rather not have had shared. (This was a posthumous biography.)

---

### **Patrick says**

I could not put down Nigel Cliff's Moscow Nights – the Van Cliburn Story – How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War, a fascinating re-visiting of the pianist's life and career, set against the backdrop of the height of the Soviet-United States rivalry as superpowers.

I loved the pacing of Cliff's storytelling, and how he alternates important chapters in Cliburn's life with important events in the Cold War – Stalin's death and Khrushchev's “thaw”, his secret speech denouncing Stalin's cult of personality, Sputnik, Gary Powers and the shooting down of the U2 over Soviet air space, the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well as the relationship between various U.S. presidents and the Soviets. Regardless of even severe hostility between the two nations, Van Cliburn was always greeted in the Soviet Union as a native son, to the extent of arousing the suspicions of the FBI – we mustn't forget that this was also the time of the “Red scare.”

Although relying heavily on Howard Reich's biography of Cliburn, Cliff also revealed many new details that I had not known. Cliff gives us much more details about the intrigues of the competition, about Cliburn's relationship with the other contestants, as well as how members of the jury viewed him. I had also not realized Rosina Lhévinne's resentment at not having heard from Cliburn personally after he won the Tchaikovsky, and how Cliburn hadn't even offered to pay her back for all the (free) extra lessons she gave him before the competition. To me, what was especially revealing was the pianist's friendship with Khrushchev, and how his standing with the Soviet politburo fell after Khrushchev's fall from grace, even though the Soviet and the Russian public continued to love him until his death.

I, and I'm sure, many others, have probably wondered – what kind of a musician would Van Cliburn had not won the Tchaikovsky Competition? With his talent and pianistic abilities, he would have had a career as a pianist. Perhaps he could have developed as a conductor, as he had already exhibited talent in that direction. But he simply didn't have time to do anything else but play one concert after another, and play for one

president after another. I suppose Cliburn's win in Moscow had also been responsible for today's proliferation of music competition, of young musicians' mindset that winning a major competition would "make" their career like Van Cliburn.

As Cliff writes, "Fame had set him up to be the greatest pianist of all, and he could not quite manage that." What person could? Cliburn's mother had brought him up to be a Southern gentleman, a church-going, courteous, and somewhat idealistic man who believed in the power of music in bridging people. Again, to quote Cliff, "As the gears of international relations turned and, for a moment, clicked into place, he was delighted to play his part." At the end, he remained an American icon, a symbol of greatest in the arts that the country is capable of.

At its best, Van Cliburn's performances should be remembered for their transcendental pianism as well as beauty of sound, a throwback to the days of Rachmaninoff and Hoffman. Perhaps he saved his best and most inspired playing for his beloved Russian audience, an audience that accepted him for the artist he was. Certainly he deserved to be remembered for his performances of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff concerti more than having played Moscow Nights for Gorbachev.

---

### **Constance says**

Really fantastic writing about the Cold War and about music. It was hard to get a clear picture of Van Cliburn as a person, but he was a very private person so I guess there's not much to do about that. The scene where Van plays for Gorbachev was amazing and made me cry. Also this book made me feel very warmly toward Khrushchev.

We constantly hear about art being a universal language, about how it brings people together, but it's sometimes hard to understand what that really means in practice. It really can take just a small amount of beauty to remind people of their humanity and compassion.

---

### **Brett says**

Although I had heard of Van Cliburn, I never knew what a sensation he had been, especially in the Soviet Union, nor the unique circumstances surrounding his acclaim. This was a rare book where I wished I had the soundtrack of his performances as accompaniment. Cliff was at his best telling the story of Van Cliburn's preparation for and success at the 1958 International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition - success at a time when the cultural superiority of Soviets was seen as a Cold War bragging right. This portion of the book contained many of Cliburn's statements of love for the Soviet people, statements which led me expect later Red-baiting intrigue at the hands of Hoover or McCarthy. However, much of what transpires after the competition held less interest. Cliburn's later reclusiveness made for a difficult subject to hold a reader's interest, yet I found the recitation of how much crowds worshipped him and how dutiful he was in paying back their affections to be a little repetitive. The drama of the rest of the book was more from the Cold War context. Tales of Khrushchev (an admirer of Cliburn) who sparred with Vice President Nixon and reoriented the USSR away from Stalinism; the sad situation of musicians like Shostakovich, who struggled to toe the party line during changing regimes; the different Presidencies having varying levels of respect for classical music. I was surprised to learn of Van Cliburn's sexual orientation, prefaced by Horowitz's quip that there

were only 3 kinds of pianists: 'Jewish pianists, homosexual pianists, and bad pianists,' but it didn't seem to have a big influence on his life, at least from what could be gathered from the book. After reading 'Moscow Nights,' I am left nostalgic for the days when classical music and musicians were a force on the American (and world) cultural scene.

---

### **Barbara Phillips-Farley says**

I am a pianist from the Fort Worth area, so I knew about Van Cliburn. This filled in some gaps regarding his life and career. It also reminded me about the tensions between USSR and US -- the Cold War. Cliburn loved Russian music and, as Rosina Lhevinne predicted, played with the grand, sweeping style that would win over the judges at the first-ever Tchaikovsky competition. Winning that was both a boon and a curse for Cliburn. Much of his success should be attributed to his mother, Rildia Bee, who taught him until he left for Juilliard. The bibliography and notes for the book indicate that a good deal of research went into its writing.

---

### **Jana says**

The story of Van Cliburn is one I've never heard before, though as soon as I finished reading this excellent biography by Nigel Cliff, I immediately checked online and found dozens of videos of his performances -- and everything Cliff writes about Cliburn's ability to play is true. The man really was a wonderful pianist, no matter what point in his life he was performing, and it's easy to see how he conquered the world by skillful manipulation of just 88 keys.

*Moscow Nights* is chiefly concerned with Cliburn's rise to fame and his triumph at the 1958 International Tchaikovsky Competition, and the after-effects of his triumphant success there, which lingered throughout the rest of his long life. Cliff writes, with great sympathy, about Cliburn's long years of study and practice, and the ways in which his passion for Russian music overshadowed so many other areas of his life. His childhood, his time at Juilliard, and his many successes after the competition are all key to understanding how this gentle man became an unwitting cultural ambassador, and how the demands of diplomacy and patriotism during the Cold War were mixed up in Cliburn's simple desire to share his gift with audiences everywhere. Cliburn remains a fully human figure, however -- Cliff doesn't shy away from relating Cliburn's foibles and flaws, and that complexity creates a stronger book.

It's important to understand events in the Soviet Union leading up to the competition, such as the shift in power from Stalin to Khrushchev, in order to see why Cliburn was such a hit with the Russian people; it's equally important to understand American politics in the same time period, after the successful Soviet launches of Sputnik and little Laika, and why the American government thought it was both a terrible and wonderful thing that Cliburn even wanted to compete in Moscow. Cliff covers all of these topics and more with a scholar's view of history, placing equal blame on the USSR and the USA for mistakes and misdeeds, but keeps the focus on how one pianist tried to make the world a better, more peaceful and joyful place.

Cliff also writes about the music itself in a way that distinguishes Mozart from Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky from Prokofiev, so that readers will be able to grasp each composer's appeal and style whether they're musicians themselves or simply enjoy listening to classical music. This is no small feat, and Cliff deserves praise for his ability to bring life and sound to the written word. I'm so glad I read *Moscow Nights*, and I can't wait to discover more of Van Cliburn's performances.

I received a copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for an honest, unbiased review. Review cross-posted to Amazon.

---

### **Jing says**

Van Cliburn's story is nothing new: a talented young pianist who won the first Tchaikovsky Piano competition held in Moscow during the height of the Cold War, who then played piano for US and Soviet politicians for decades as a music ambassador, whose own music and personal development (including his homosexuality) were somewhat stunted by early success, societal culture and the public's curiosity. I wondered what I would gain from this book, but after finishing the book I was quite touched.

In a sense, everyone has a role to play in the world. We might not know it or might not like it, and of course we try to define our roles instead of being defined. For Van Cliburn, his role was defined by his early success and he did not fight it. He was a kind-hearted, innocent child who went along, dutifully playing the pieces that he became known for and dutifully saying all the cliché. No, he did not get to fully develop himself musically, he concealed his homosexuality, he couldn't live his life exactly how he wanted it. But these just made him to be one of the majority of the people in this world, who have to accept a reality that is so far from their dreams. What's remarkable about Van Cliburn is that he carried himself with dignity, a sense of duty and kindness. He seemed to have identified something that is larger than life. Is it music, is it duty to his country, is it love or friendship or Russia? Or all of the above? But whatever it was, he gladly gave himself up for it. He is gone, just like we all will be gone, but the music that he played will still be around and will touch the hearts of many generations to come.

---

### **Phil Griffin says**

This is one of the best books I have read in a long time. The perfect combination of music and politics , two of my biggest interests. I admit a prejudice as a long time fan of Van Cliburn who was in heaven when I attended his concert at the Minneapolis Auditorium with the Minneapolis Symphony (not their usually venue....indicative of his rock star status) as a child.

The author does a wonderful job of mixing the politics of the day, which play a major role in Cliburn's career, with the intense pressure of being a musician at the highest levels of musicianship and competition.

I cannot overstate how much I enjoyed this.

---

### **Anne says**

I met him once in Cincinnati, introduced by a musician friend who had attended Juilliard with him. He was friendly and personable but a bit shy also. His life was overshadowed by his mother, Rildia Bee who dominated his whole life and kept him sexually repressed. Sad story all around about how she ruined his personal life and directed his friendships, even encouraged him into a gay relationship in spite of his deep Christian beliefs. The parts in Russia are fascinating, and I loved his love of Russian classical Music as I am a fan of romantic music, where the Russians such as Rachmaninoff, Tschaikovsky , Rimsky-Korzkoff and

Borodin have no equal.

---

### **Tavner Delcamp says**

This is a very interesting account of the life of one of the most famous pianists of the 20th century, Van Cliburn. Van Cliburn rose to international fame when he won the first Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow in 1958. The author relates the early life of Cliburn in Shreveport, Louisiana, and later in Kilgore, Texas. He was taught by his mother, Rildia Bee Cliburn, from an early age after his musical gifts were recognized. Throughout his childhood his mother exerted an enormous influence on his musical and pianistic development. She herself had studied with the great Russian pianist, Arthur Friedheim, who had studied with Franz Liszt. She imbued her son with a deep love of the 19th century romantic piano repertoire, in particular, with an emphasis on the Russian school of piano performance. In his late teens he was able to enter the Juilliard School in New York City where he studied with the famous teacher Rosina Lhevinne. Being Russian she taught the grand style perfected by the teachers at the Moscow Conservatory where she studied. The first Tchaikovsky competition was set up to showcase the accomplishments of Soviet pianists. However, when Cliburn participated in the competition he created a sensation with the Russian audiences and judges of the jury, too, which included the great pianists Emil Gilels and Sviatoslav Richter. Even Nikita Khruschev agreed with the jury's decision to award first prize to the young, very talented American. Cliburn's experience gave him a deep love of Russian music and the Russian people. He made several visits over the next 30 years to tour and re-establish his friendships with the many Russian friends he made during the competition. His career took off at an extraordinary pace during the 1960's when he was promoted by the famous promoter Sol Hurok who was behind the success of many other great artists. Also, Cliburn was influenced by performing for and socializing with several Presidents beginning with Eisenhower. He did undertake a 15-year sabbatical from performing beginning in the mid 1970s. The stress of performing at a high level and expecting to be a constant international celebrity took its toll. But, he came out of retirement in the 1980s when 'perestroika' occurred under the direction of Mikhail Gorbachev. He gave a noteworthy White House recital playing for both Reagan and Gorbachev which re-ignited his career. He followed that event with several more trips to Russia where he was still lionized 40 years after winning the Tchaikovsky competition. I had the privilege of seeing Cliburn perform in 1972 at the National Music Camp in Interlochen, Michigan. For several years Cliburn performed benefit concerts in July to support the arts programs at the camp. I'll never forget the first rehearsal when he arrived onstage to play through Rachmaninoff's 3rd Piano Concerto, a favorite concerto of his. I was playing French Horn in the orchestra. The sound he could generate was simply awesome. He had huge hands and could navigate the extremely difficult piano part with ease. I was able to speak to him during the week and found him to be a really friendly, open person. I recommend this book as a document of a great pianist and who loved both his own country and Russia and had a passionate interest in using music for promoting peaceful relations between countries.

---

### **Rose Ann says**

What a fantastic story -- not just of the life and career of this transcendent artist, but of the personalities and background of the world leaders and other artists of the times. I have loved Van Cliburn since I was a teenager and it is because of him that I came to know and love the great Romantic composers. I was lucky enough to have heard him perform twice.

The author has done an outstanding job with his research -- the bibliography is excellent and extensive end-notes add to the story -- but he does not hit you over the head with his knowledge. The entire book flows so smoothly and the end result is a riveting tale of a man and an artist and the indelible impact he had on the world. Highly recommended for everyone.

---

### **Dschreiber says**

For rabid Van Cliburn fans, this must be pure gold. For the rest of us, however, it's interesting, certainly, but maybe a little too much of a good thing. The author has researched Cliburn's Russian connections so thoroughly, including with lots of interviews, that we are often led in an hour-by-hour description of events, anecdote after anecdote, all of them true, one assumes, but not all of them of significance. It often feels like one of those cinema verite documentary films that takes us to the concert and the reception afterward and to the next morning, but which could really do with some editing to make sure it all adds up to something. With that caveat, though, it's highly readable. Good story-telling.

---