International Piano Competition

'Brainchild' of Dr. Irl Allison

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The winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, to end Saturday night in Fort Worth after two weeks of some of the most exciting recitals ever performed in Texas, can thank a former Abilenean for giving him the opportunity of his young lifetime.

It was Dr. Irl Allison, former dean of the Department of Music at Hardin-Simmons University, who "dreamed up" the competition and made it possible through the National Guild of Piano Teachers, of which he is national president.

Dr. Allison told the Reporter-News this week that not only did the National Guild have its start in Abilene, but that his first thoughts of an international piano competition to be held in Texas were "mulled over" on the front porch of his home in the early Elmwood area of Abilene.

"I always had in mind a competition which would bring together the flower of the musical world in one big competition," Dr. Allison said. "It took a long time that dream, but I believe we have it in our Van Cliburn competition."

He explained that the competition was made possible through the tremendous growth of the National Guild, which Dr. Allison founded while he was dean of music at Hardin-Simmons University. "By 1945 we had grown to 11,000 members, which was quite an accomplishment. But today we have 70,000 members in the U.S." Four Cents Each

The competition, which presents the winner with a $10,000 prize as a four-year stipend, is being financed by contributions of four cents from each teacher and student in the National Guild.

Dr. Allison, who also had a home here at 1530 Parramore Ave., and who came to H-SU as dean of music in 1927 from Montezuma College in New Mexico, said that 44 of the top young pianists from 17 nations were selected to participate in the Van Cliburn competition, including four from Japan, four from the Soviet Union and artists from France, Korea, England, Mexico, South American countries and other nations.

Credit Due Cliburn
Dr. Allison gives the tall Texas Van Cliburn much credit in the establishment of the international competition.

"It was the example set by Van that gave the final impetus to establishment of the competition, and he has contributed greatly to the program since it was founded," he explained. Cliburn whose great career was launched by a concert, has spent almost the entire two weeks in Fort Worth at the competition giving his example, his name, his advice, some of his money, and a great deal of his valuable time to the glory and improvement of his profession.

Gave 4-th of Fee
Cliburn contributed to the competition $4,000 of the $5,000 fee he received from playing in Fort Worth in March of 1961. He also has put up $600 as a special prize to the contestant who gives the best performance of the Brahms chamber works in the semifinals.

The pianist helped officials work out the rigorous repertoire for the contestants to insure that it certify only pianists who are ready to start their professional careers.

Dr. Allison said that when he announced plans for the competition at a gathering at the Ridglea Country Club of Fort Worth Nov. 30, 1968, Cliburn was perhaps the most surprised of the 500 guests there.

Also surprised was another guest, Mrs. Grace Ward Lankford, co-founder of the Fort Worth Piano Teachers Forum and now co-chairman of the competitions.

The Forum had planned to expand its annual soloa festival to take in the four states adjacent to Texas and to offer a first prize of $1,000.

"Van Was Stunned"
But Dr. Allison's announcement that he planned time to realize that dream, "just happened to go on the road" for the then growing National Guild of Piano Teachers, and made his home in New York City. He was elected president of the Guild the same year and has held the post since that time.

He is also the founder of the Golden Rule for Abilenians made his announcements "Van was stunned. I was sitting right next to him, and he had something right up to his lips to eat, and he just dropped it."

Van had good reason to be shocked. The $10,000 prize likely is the largest prize ever to be offered in a musical competition.

In all, $20,560 is being offered in prizes in the competition this year.

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Dr. Allison has had a long and distinguished career. Born at Warren, Tex., in 1896—his father was a mathematics professor at Baylor University—he attended Baylor to receive his A. B. and A. M. degrees, then attended the Southwestern Conservatory in Dallas in 1947 and received his LL. D at Hardin-Simmons in 1954.

He served as dean of music at Rusk College, piano instructor at Baylor College for Women and dean of fine arts at Montezuma College in New Mexico before coming to Hardin-Simmons as dean of music in 1927.

President 27 Years
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