Pianists Find Gold

Reprinted from The New York Times, October 11, 1962, by Raymond Eriksen

The reputation of Texans for doing things in a big way was sustained by the first Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which ended in Fort Worth just a week ago. Appropriately enough for a host city that has made money in oil wells, the contest machinery functioned smoothly on well-lubricated gears. In the words of Leopold Mannes, chairman of the jury and a judge at many other such competitions, “None has been so well organized.”

It should have been. The planning went on for four years, following the inspiration that visited IrI Allison, founder and president of the National Guild of Piano Teachers, at a 1958 dinner in Fort Worth. Feeling that the city’s name attached to the competition would not draw the international competitors that were hoped for, Mr. Allison decided to honor one of Texas’ favorite sons in the title, Van Cliburn.

Hard Worker

From then on, Grace Ward Lankford, co-founder and president of the Fort Worth Piano Teachers Forum, took over. A shrewd, determined and hardworking woman, Mrs. Lankford gathered around her a corps of equally tireless assistants, traveled to New York and Rio de Janeiro to observe other international competitions in action, and tackled the Chamber of Commerce for financial backing. Although the Chamber’s members resisted the idea at first, they finally granted $100,000, of which approximately $75,000 was used by the competition’s end.

As bait to attract the best contestants, $10,000 was offered for the first prize. It was to be paid in four annual installments to the winner. If an American should win, it would save him taxes. It also eased the payment problem, since each $2,500 installment is being paid out of a 4-cent assessment on the 70,000 members of the National Guild of Piano Teachers and a subsidiary organization of piano students.

Other prizes were forthcoming from individuals, private organizations and foundations, until, with the first prize, they exceeded $80,000. An international jury was corralled from Europe, the Soviet Union, Japan, Latin America and the United States. These two factors, plus personal contact with foreign embassies in this country, produced a field of 44 contestants from all over.

The competition was thorough. Besides the usual repertory solos, the pianists had to play chamber music by Brahms and concertos by Beethoven and Rachmaninoff or Prokofiev. American music was well represented among the requirements, including two movements of Samuel Barber’s Sonata, Lee Holby’s Capriccio on Five Notes (composed on commission for the contest), a choice of one of the four rarely-played MacDowell sonatas and an important contemporary work (such as the Copland Sonata).

As is well known by now, the contest was won by an American, Ralph Votapek, of Milwaukee, and two of the four Soviet entrants, Nikolai Petrov and Mikhail Voskresenski, placed second and third. Contestants from France, Japan, Portugal and this country were among the remaining six finalists.

Looking Ahead

Judges and contestants still had some suggestions as to how the next competition—they are scheduled every four years—could be improved. It was hoped that some way could be found to screen the many American entrants, although it was admitted that it would be hard to find a fair way to do this. It was proposed that the jury be selected early enough to allow them to meet and help determine some of the rules they will be bound by. Better and more carefully spaced rehearsals for contestants with the chamber-music ensembles and the orchestra were urged.

Local Interest

How much interest did the contest stir locally? Cab drivers talked about it to their fares. Street banners welcomed the visitors. One newspaper had two pools going on the winner. Crowds thronged around the enormous glass window of a downtown bank where contestants gave noontime recitals (of their own volition and for a fee). The 1,200-seat auditorium at Texas Christian University, where the contest was held, was usually packed all day long for the daily events over a two-week period.

So the contest fulfilled its three aims — “to find and promote new talent . . . to encourage world-wide interest in piano playing and . . . to foster more friendly relations among the nations.”

Joseph Anderson Congratulates All

Joseph Anderson writes Guild Headquarters from The Edgewater Beach in Chicago, Illinois, “I have just talked with Mr. Gui Mombaerts who confirmed the fact that Mr. Ralph Votapek of Milwaukee, Wisconsin had been chosen as the winner of the first prize in the first Van Cliburn Quadrennial International Piano Competition. CONGRATULATIONS!

“Mr. Mombaerts was one of the teachers of Mr. Votapek, as well as the ‘maker of artist-pianists’ Mme. Rosina Lhevinne. These are all to be heartily congratulated.”