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Cold War at the Keyboard? The First International Tchaikovsky Competition

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Research Abstract

The International Tchaikovsky Competition is a large-scale, highly-publicized classical music contest in multiple categories that first took place in March 1958. Founded only a year after the launch of Sputnik, the Tchaikovsky Competition was staged partly to showcase the Soviet Union's artistic superiority. Even though the jury consisted of the best known Soviet musicians (such as Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels, and Lev Oborin), it awarded first prize to the American pianist Van Cliburn. My research shows that despite the presumption of antagonism, rivalry, and struggle associated with the competitive format, the Tchaikovsky Competition had elements of festivity and promoted international interactions; it became a site for formation, performance, and perpetuation of international relationships. Cliburn's victory shows that despite a highly politically charged atmosphere, the contest was not rigged and the jury's decision was not made in the interest of politics. The contest also accomplished political and aesthetic agendas. It promoted musical and personal interactions between Soviet citizens and foreign contestants; furthermore, the contestants learned the staples of the Russian repertoire that they would play elsewhere in their concerts, helping propagate Soviet musical legacy abroad.

Research Goals

Extant literature on classical music performance competitions is largely of a documentary nature, often limited to lists of repertoire requirements, winners, and judges. I contend, however, that such competitions illuminate not only the state of the classical music industry but also the juxtaposition of politics and culture. Several books have recently appeared to show the possibility of approaching music competitions from various academic disciplines. For instance, historian Kiril Tomoff in *Virtuosi Abroad* situates the Tchaikovsky Competition in the context of the Cold War and discusses the music contest as an extension of imperial projects and ambitions. Sociologist Lisa McCormick in *Performing Civility* discusses music contests more generally as a social form and manifestation of cosmopolitanism. One of my goals is to engage in a dialogue with these scholars' work, using my background in Slavic studies and musicology. For example, how are Cliburn and the competition portrayed in literary texts and periodicals? What musical qualities set Cliburn apart from other contestants and made him the unanimous winner?

My research also examines the competition's founding and objectives and compares them to the actual turn of events. For example, why did so many Soviet citizens (including countless officials), who had been exposed to elaborate anti-Western propaganda, come to embrace someone who was supposed to be an enemy from the West? By examining the memoirs of attendees and jury members as well as documents from the inaugural competition, I show that the Tchaikovsky Competition embodies a political and cultural tug of war, the outcomes of which often imperil the host nation's objectives. My research shows that while the competition was fierce and Soviet participants were deliberately kept away from foreign competitors, a strong sense of camaraderie inadvertently developed amongst competitors and jury members, effectively transforming the competition into a sort of international music festival. My project

contends that contrary to what one might expect from the format, the competition actually facilitated post-Stalin Thaw cultural exchanges between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Research Activities

I mainly used the Lenin State Library and the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) archives in Moscow. My tasks include reconstructing a more complete picture of the inaugural competition as well as comparing it to other significant events of the time and later competitions. To this end, I read major newspapers' coverage of the First and Second Tchaikovsky Competitions, focusing mainly on the piano category – because of Cliburn's surprise win – but also looking at other categories such as violin and cello. I used the Lenin Library in Khimki extensively, since they have the most extensive collection of periodicals; furthermore, most major newspapers (*Pravda*, *Izvestiia*) are digitally archived there and easily searchable by keyword. Besides the major newspapers, I also consulted *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* and *Sovetskaia muzyka*. From reading the newspaper coverage of the 1962 competition, one can conclude that Cliburn remained relevant in the Soviet society; he was not a one-shot deal and was far from being forgotten (which does happen to some competition winners). For instance, Cliburn's greetings to competitors that year were published in major newspapers. Furthermore, he performed in several cities in the Soviet Union to sold-out crowds. There was even a discussion of making a documentary film about Cliburn, as I discovered in RGALI documents. The film likely never materialized, due to both bureaucratic and financial reasons. Nevertheless, the film project reveals the extent in which Cliburn was adored in the Soviet Union, far exceeding the reception of any Soviet individuals in the US.

In addition to newspapers, the monthly magazine *Sovetskaia muzyka* published essays by members of the competition jury, including both Soviet and foreign ones such as Emil' Gilel's,

Heinrich Neuhaus, Arthur Bliss, and Pancho Vladigerov. The essays not only describe Cliburn's phenomenal success, but some of them also describe the unusual experience of listening to Asian or African musicians performing Russian and Western music. For instance, for the Bulgarian judge Vladigerov, Chinese pianist Liu Shi-Kun (co-winner of the second prize) was a real discovery. Likewise, Japanese and Chinese pianists generally made the biggest impressions on the English judge Bliss. The most interesting finding was perhaps the judges' scorecards at the RGALI (in Kabalevskii's collection). Even though the scores were not made available to the public, the scorecards were signed and frequently contained comments. By looking at the scorecards, we know that judges often adjusted their scores in relation to later contestants and sometimes to meet the cutoff score.

I also read memoirs of other competitors, such as Valerii Klimov (winner of the violin category) and Lev Vlasenko (winner of the second prize in piano). Klimov's account points out that contrary to expectations, foreigners were often more popular, even beloved, than Soviet competitors. Vlasenko's account highlights the Russian connection of American pianists; for example, both Cliburn and Daniel Pollack trained under Rosina Lhevinne at the Juilliard School. We know that the Russian connection was cited by the Minister of Culture Ekaterina Furtseva to argue that awarding the first prize to Cliburn would not symbolize a total Soviet defeat since Cliburn was trained in the Russian tradition. Vlasenko also points out that Cliburn was the first to play the grander cadenza for Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, which conquered the Soviet public as well as Soviet pianists. Besides the memoirs of judges and competitors, I also consulted choreographer Igor' Moiseev's memoir, *Ia vspominaiu*, because it aptly illustrates the political nature of artistic endeavors during the Cold War. For example, after his dance troupe's

1958 US tour, he was accused of being a sympathizer for the US and had trouble with Minister of Culture Nikolai Mikhailov.

While in Moscow, I also sought opportunity to improve my Russian. Even though I did not seek formal language training through the Title VIII grant, I spoke daily with my Russian friends and actively asked them questions about the passages I was analyzing as well as the nuances of the Russian language more generally. I know my spoken Russian can benefit from using more idioms (expressions like с корабля на бал, for example, are commonly used but rarely taught in textbooks). I also purchased books on proverbs (поговорки и пословицы) so I can better recognize and understand them. I also sought materials for the courses I would be teaching upon my return to the US. Since I would be teaching an advanced Russian course on contemporary Russia (Россия сегодня), politics seemed an important topic. To this end, I collected campaign literature and brochures from various candidates and parties, so that my students could understand their philosophies and specific agendas.

Important Research Findings

1. Van Cliburn's ambiguous reception in the US: Part of my research result was presented at the AATSEEL Conference in San Francisco on February 4, 2017. The paper, titled "American Hero and Soviet Sympathizer? The Case of Van Cliburn," discusses the ambiguous reactions Cliburn's victory at the 1958 International Tchaikovsky Competition evoked in the United States. I examine the notion of the "front" not only between the US and the USSR, but also within the US itself. On the one hand, Cliburn was clearly a hero for winning the competition on the enemy soil; on the other hand, he was not a fervent nationalist for the US and, in fact, consistently showed strong affinity for Russians. Consequently, his reception in the US was by no means universally positive. While the

US government sought to open up bridges with the Soviet Union and rejoiced in Cliburn's victory, suspicion of and insecurity about openness were constantly present. Even the US Embassy in Moscow was aloof to the sensation Cliburn caused. The reporter for Times magazine wrote that "the US Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson and his wife had not even made plans to attend Van's finals audition until they were convinced by American contestants that to fail to appear would be a major blunder." Even though Cliburn's victory helped facilitate more cultural exchange between the two nations, it could not immediately resolve the mistrust that had been accumulating for years. *Washington Post* reporter Mary Thayer pointed out the lack of enthusiasm in Washington when Cliburn went there to meet with President Eisenhower: "There was no Texas fanfare. Texas Senators Lyndon Johnson and Ralph Yarborough were out of town. President Eisenhower chatted with Cliburn for 15 minutes and skipped the celebration concert."

2. Comparison with the Chopin Competition: A surprising commonality between the inaugural Chopin and Tchaikovsky Competitions is that in each case, the first prize was won by a foreigner and not by a contestant representing the host nation. The decision of the jury may have hurt the host nations at first, but the decision shows integrity that proved beneficial to the competitions in the long run. Imagine how the international community would react (or not react) if the result was clearly rigged. The winners of both Chopin and Tchaikovsky Competitions were well received both in the host nation and their home country. The winner of the First Chopin Competition, Lev Oborin, received a hero's welcome on his return to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Oborin was beloved by Poles and toured in Poland after the competition. After the Second World War, Oborin

performed in Poland frequently and played charity concerts to help rebuild Warsaw's concert hall. However, he did not reach the same status as Cliburn did with the Russian public. Cliburn replicated some of Oborin's charity, such as proposing to give part of his winnings to establish two memorial prizes at the Moscow Conservatory. Cliburn became a star not only because of his musical skills and general goodwill; he was not shy to show his fondness for Russian culture publicly and even gave a short speech in Russian at the award ceremony. His affinity for all things Russian was reciprocated with more valor by the Russian public. The two winners from each inaugural competition differed in many respects ranging from appearance to playing style, but their paths crossed at the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition, where Oborin was a judge and Cliburn a contestant. Like almost all other jury members, Oborin voted to have Cliburn as the sole winner.

3. All-Union Competition: I had come across fascinating documents at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) on the All-Union Competition (established in 1933) and made it my secondary project, which I presented at the ASEEEES convention in Washington DC in November, 2016. As the first large-scale musical contest in the USSR, the All-Union Competition provided a platform not only for young performers to gain exposure and potential stardom but also for musicians from different parts of the union to gather and interact. In some ways, as suggested by the adjective "Vsesoiuznyi," the event carried an underlying objective of nation building and cultural unification, a fact attested to by the concerted effort to bring participants from all parts of the union and the repertoire requirement to play at least some Soviet works. The competition tested the Soviet bureaucracy in its ability to organize a fair contest and bring together an extraordinarily diverse nation. The result, however, was mixed, as musicians from both

capital cities still dominated and representatives from some places were wholly lacking. Furthermore, corruption and scandals abounded in 1937, which seriously challenged the competition as an institution. The All-Union Competition came at a time when the USSR was strengthening its control over the arts, and the interplay between politics and arts - at times incongruous with the ideal of a fair competition - could not be more pronounced.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

At the Gala Concert of the International Tchaikovsky Competition in July 2015, Russian President Vladimir V. Putin was in attendance along with numerous foreign ambassadors and high-ranking officials from the Ministry of Culture. Putin opened the concert with a speech in which he lauded the competition's objective and popularity (it drew millions of listeners over the Internet), and extolled the universal appeal of Tchaikovsky's music. My project shows that music, and more specifically the Tchaikovsky Competition, not only still plays an important role in Russian cultural identity but still unites people of different backgrounds and political convictions because it offers opportunities for cultural exchange. Even during tense political times, as was the case in 1958, cultural exchange has typified U.S.-Russian relations. But to what extent is this exchange immune to political challenges? Does it promote healthy interactions between the two countries, or does it undercut the relations when the outcome goes awry?

My research shows that unlike the Soviet delegation, there was no organized effort by the American government to send or fund contestants for the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition. In fact, even though the Soviets made a strong outreach effort to recruit a strong pool of musicians, the competition was announced only in few channels, such as a Soviet-backed newspaper. On the other hand, the Soviet contestants underwent multiple rounds of internal selection. Once selected, the musicians were treated as military recruits; they were given a lecture on their "duty

as patriots to their fatherland, to the Revolution and to Soviet power.” In 1958, the U.S. government was not inclined to invest in the event. Both Van Cliburn and violinist Joyce Flissler were funded privately by the Mary Baird Rockefeller Aid to Music Program, which had pledged the contestants to secrecy on the theory that their presence in Russia would be politically unpopular back home. The question is: has much changed between 1958 and now?

The US government clearly favors science and math over arts and humanities, and it has remained reluctant to fully back artists and musicians, financially or otherwise. The recent proposed cuts to the National Endowment for the Arts and other art programs represent yet another aggressive step to downplay the importance of arts. One can only point out that “soft power” and public diplomacy matter tremendously, especially in maintaining and improving relations between two countries. In comparison to military and defense spending, funding and supporting arts and cultural exchange seems a relatively inexpensive and effective way to achieve such goals as raising the American standing in the world and promoting American interests abroad.

Co-Curricular Activities

Being in Russia in the same year as the Duma election and the US presidential election afforded me the opportunity to not only observe their election but also to discuss the US election with Russian students. On September 19, 2016, I attended a town hall meeting, in which the US Ambassador to Russia John Tefft talked about the Ukraine crisis and the US election at the Spaso House. At the meeting, I met several Foreign Service Officers as well as other expats in Moscow. I also met Mark Wentworth, who is in charge of cultural affairs at the embassy. On October 26, together with two American students who study at my host institution Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU), I met with 5 graduate students of Prof. Marina Kaul’s

seminar. We discussed things ranging from the Electoral College to the controversies of the campaign. The students were generally interested the US election/politics and asked engaging questions.

In collaboration with the Student Activities Office at the RGGU, I played a piano recital on December 29. During my prior visits, I had built a good working relationship with Liudmila Kozharina, the director of the Student Activities Office, and my research sponsor Prof. Marina Kaul was fully supportive of the idea. The recital took place in the main auditorium at the RGGU campus and was well-attended and well-received. The program, titled “Evening of Fantasies,” included works by Shostakovich, Schumann, and Chopin. You can read about the concert here: <http://student.rgggu.ru/news.html?id=1700>. A reception, with wonderful conversations and refreshments, capped off the evening.

Conclusions

I had a very productive 4.5 months in Moscow. As I am familiar with Moscow and its research institutions from prior visits, I was able to start my work immediately. The materials I found not only helped me make progress in my proposed research but led to other research projects. I also worked hard on my Russian and made significant progress, which directly and positively impacted the courses I am teaching this semester. The positive interactions I had with my host institution, exemplified by the meeting with Russian students and my piano recital, resulted in a standing invitation to return to RGGU in the future. Overall, the Title VIII Research Grant allowed me to make significant progress not only in my research but also in my Russian linguistic and cultural competences, for which I am extremely grateful.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

I am in the process of preparing two articles for publication, one on the Tchaikovsky Competition and the other on the All-Union Competition. The latter is shorter and nearly finished; I am looking for a suitable journal to publish it. I will submit the article on the Tchaikovsky Competition this summer, after having read Stuart Isacoff's book on Cliburn titled *When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn's Cold War Triumph, and Its Aftermath*, due in April 2017.

Another research project came about as a result of my stay in Moscow. Following my presentation at the ASEES Conference in November 2016, I approached other scholars who are interested in the topic of music and literature and submitted a roundtable proposal for next year's ASEES in Chicago. I will be presenting on *Anna Karenina* as a musical adaptation, which I saw in Moscow in December. The questions I will address include: why has *Anna Karenina* not had the famous operatic transposition that *Eugene Onegin* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* have had? In what ways does musical as a genre suit or misfit Tolstoy's novel? This project is a direct extension of my stay in Moscow, and I look forward to engaging in a dialogue with the work of other scholars on the panel: Alexander Burry, Marina Frolova-Walker, Karen Evans-Romaine, and Polina Dimova.

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Photos



At the Spaso House following the Town Hall meeting with Ambassador John Tefft



Street festival in Moscow, celebrating the 869th anniversary of the city founding



During my piano recital at the RGGU on December 29, 2016



Santa came to greet the readers in the Lenin Library (Khimki)



Wintery scene in front of the Bolshoi Theater