

## VISIT OF A LEGEND

## Van Cliburn in Manila

The excitement had been building up for almost a month — since the news first filtered out that Van Cliburn was going to perform at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Suddenly, the radio stations were playing not just acid rock but also romantic "Rach," which seemed to affect Filipinos the same way it did the Russians when Van Cliburn played Rachmaninoff in Russia's music halls. Manila newspapers and magazines dug deep into their library into the Van Cliburn biography and "Who's Who in America" for more information to feed readers about the all-American virtuoso. Filipinos have a special fondness for geniuses in general and musical geniuses in particular so it was hardly surprising that coffee shop talk and campus chatter often revolved around the Cliburn legend. Of course, the affinity that music-minded Filipinos feel toward music virtuosos only partially explains the preoccupation with the scheduled visit of the American pianist. The other half of the answer lies in Van Cliburn himself. The Texas long-hair is, in the words of a friend, "a Horowitz, Liberace and Elvis Presley all rolled into one."

By the time the arrival date — Monday, June 11 — came around, the whole of Manila had been infected with Cliburn fever. Schoolchildren, their curiosity aroused by stories about this man who was playing with the Houston Symphony when he was their age, lined up along the palm-fringed Roxas Boulevard to get a glimpse of him as he passed.

At the Manila International Airport, word spread that Cliburn's arrival would be delayed by some four hours. However, nobody squawked, nobody fumed, nobody fretted — not even the young girls who each carried a basket of rose petals and who were straining to scatter the petals on the carpeted walk. Quite possibly, everyone shared the same thought: it is not everyday that a legend comes to visit, a legend who, moreover, is coming in the spirit of service to the country's artists.

At half past eleven, the Philippine Air Lines jet carrying Van Cliburn finally touched down and taxied to a stop. It had come all the way from San Francisco, leaving San Francisco International Airport at 8:00 p.m. the night before.

But Van Cliburn's journey to Manila may have begun on December 7, 1972 when he saw a videocast of the First Lady, Mrs. Imelda R. Marcos, courageously defending herself from a crazed attacker at the Nayong Pilipino. Intrigued by the First Lady who had fought so bravely for her life and who, he learned, was an indefatigable crusader for the arts in her country, Van Cliburn determined to meet her.

When Mrs. Marcos went to Washington in January to attend President Nixon's inaugural, Van Cliburn sought her out and offered to do his share gratis et amore in the establishment of a foundation for young Filipino artists.

The gesture was typical of the man. Cliburn is known to have performed practically for free for the benefit of

conservatory students. When he was in Leningrad, he allowed Russian students (who otherwise would not have had the chance to see him and hear him play) to be present during rehearsals. At Baylor University where he was paid \$4,000 for a concert, Cliburn promptly donated the amount for the establishment of four scholarships in that institution. Later, he also put up \$10,000 to start the school orchestra. Once, Cliburn skipped a high-paying concert engagement to play for a church banquet. His coming to the Philippines, his first time to visit the Far East, to perform for the benefit of young artists, was entirely in character for this great artist and compassionate man.

Appreciative Manilans spread out the red carpet for the long, tall pianist from Kilgore, Texas. He emerged squinting against the tropical sun and was met by a shower of rose petals. At the same time, the First Lady, resplendent in a red-and-white embroidered terno, stepped out of the MIA's VIP Room to meet him. Van Cliburn bent down from his 6'4" height to kiss the hand of Mrs. Marcos, whom he referred to as "the little lady." The phrase, he explained, was the embodiment of his "great affection coupled with respect" for the Philippines' First Lady.

Manilans had advance intelligence that Van Cliburn was an untemperamental artist, "an easygoing Texan" who didn't conform to any of the stereotyped image of a virtuoso. Still, it came almost as a shock to the welcoming throng to find this artistic giant so boyish in looks as well as in manner. He seemed to lope along the carpeted walk, his gangly frame towering above the First Lady, Secretary of Tourism Jose Aspiras, the artist's manager Harvey Scharfman and the Air Force honor guards. Watching him, one found it easy to believe that he once walked out in the middle of rehearsals to get himself a candy bar from the slot machine, that he broke down and cried when an 8-year-old boy made him an offering of a photograph of himself.

At the press reception following his arrival, Van Cliburn spoke haltingly, almost shyly, on his music ideology: "I think that music is a divine mystery and it certainly is a spiritual consolation that all of us as human beings have and it's one of the greatest gifts that God has given us." On his sources of inspiration: "I think that you turn to the memories that you have and the beautiful things in life that you can remember." On his role in the cause of Philippine music: "I am only an instrument of Mrs. Marcos — it is she who has done such a wonderful job in that respect." On the notion that "Rach Three" is his favorite: "I don't think I really have a favorite, no. It's very hard to say because when you have a great name and a great work at art, I think it stands alone, not so much the artist but the work, so whatever you play or whatever you perform is a favorite."

The "born flaming virtuoso" seemed self-conscious in the midst of all the attention and the adulation



Tribute to a great artist: First Lady leads airport welcome

focused on him — hardly the stance one would expect of someone who had been given a ticketed welcome in New York, who had been flooded with gifts, letters and flowers by adoring fans from suburban matrons to the Soviet Union's Madame Krushchev and who, in short, is the most celebrated pianist of the century. He sat his hands clasped, as if to steady himself for the cameras, his long, pale fingers (which are said to cover a thirteen-note span) resting like a piece of sculpture.

"After seeing you today," he told audiences on nationwide radio and television, "I can so well understand the great enthusiasm that people have all over the world when they come to the Philippines and they enjoy the hospitality that you offer all guests. You're a very gracious people, but particularly today, my heart is very full and I feel extremely honored by the presence of the First Lady, Mrs. Imelda Marcos. I want to tell you how deeply grateful I am to all of you for your enthusiastic welcome and I hope that I will not disappoint you and that you will be happy with my playing."

Van Cliburn had two scheduled performances — June 14 and 16 — at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. In both performances, he was to be assisted by the newly organized CCP Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Professor Luis Valencia. Tickets to the two fund-raising concerts were all sold out.

And for the thousands who could

not buy tickets got a thoroughly pleasant surprise: his first concert was televised live from the Cultural Center. Cliburn's own feelings about coming back for another performance seemed pretty clear. "You have such drawing power for me," he told radio and TV audiences, "because you are so kind today and I can see why so many people when they come away from here, they feel enriched and overjoyed to have the pleasure of knowing your audiences."

At the welcome arch of the Nayong Pilipino, Cliburn carefully inscribed his name. Then, unable to resist the schoolchildren who were chanting "Mabuhay Van Cliburn," he walked towards them, muttering something about his not knowing "it would be like this."

At the newly constructed Derham Park along Roxas Boulevard, the First Lady and her guest made a brief stop to acknowledge the rousing welcome of some two thousand Pasay City residents.

Before proceeding to Malacañang where he would stay as house guest, Van Cliburn made a tour of Rizal Park which was all set for the June 12 Independence Day celebrations. At the Rizal monument, he laid a wreath in homage to the national hero. The wife of Manila mayor presented the visiting artist with a symbolic key to the city of Manila, a city which had opened its heart to him long before he arrived.

GWENDOLYN Z. REYES