

Richard Rodzinski is presently the Executive Director of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition Foundation and the Van Cliburn Foundation. He is the son of the famous conductor Arthur Rodzinski who was the music director of New York Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Mr. Richard Rodzinski was born in New York and raised in Chicago, South America, and Europe. He returned to America in 1959 and spent his undergraduate years at Oberlin and Columbia Universities, remaining at Columbia for his graduate work in musicology. His career as an arts administrator began in 1962 at the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. He also served as a consultant and undertook projects for several organizations including the Ford Foundation, OPERA America, and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1986, after spending a decade as Artistic Administrator of San Francisco Opera and then, the Metropolitan Opera, Mr. Rodzinski came to Fort Worth, Texas, to become the Executive Director.

AT: Thank you for meeting with me today at such a short notice. I know that you as the Executive Director of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, you must have a very busy schedule.

RR: Yes, I am glad I have this opportunity to speak to Japanese public through Chopin magazine. I see from the copy of Chopin that you brought that it is a magazine primarily devoted to piano and pianists...

AT: ...and also to teaching and pedagogical questions related to piano. Each issue also covers current as well as historical events. For example, when Shura Cherkasky died, the issue had many retrospectives about him. Chopin is a very good magazine.

RR: Yes, I see. I wish that we in America had something like this magazine. There is nothing good here. In England, there are good ones, such as Gramophone or the one published by BBC which has current music news events as well as special articles.

AT: Yes, and also I think that most music magazines in States are subscription magazines, whereas in Japan, Chopin is readily available in bookstores. This fact shows that there is a great difference in general public awareness between Americans and Japanese towards classical music.

RR: It is a pity. By the way, have you heard of the work that Elaine Yamagata does for Cliburn Foundation in Japan? She formed an organization which has incredible members: Yamaha directors, leading bank figures, art critics, even the chief priest of Ise Shrine... The purpose of that group is to raise the public awareness of the existence of Cliburn Foundation. They sponsor debut recitals of young Japanese pianists with the hope that they will catch the attention of Cliburn Foundation here in Fort Worth.

AT: As I look at these programs from Japan, I want to comment that another difference between the American and Japanese approach to concert giving, is that in Japan, young artists often combine together to give an evening (concert) made up of several individual performers and the public will go to hear them, whereas here in States, it is all individually set up. Do you have similar concerts set up in America?

RR: No, I wish we had. This is exactly the thing we at Cliburn Foundation are trying to do. We need so much more of this. We had a thing called The International Friends of Van Cliburn, which was a very loose organization, and now we replaced that with International Association of the Van Cliburn Foundation. People may join the association for \$50 a year and receive newsletter and various information. We hope that one day where there will be a stronger nuclei of members, that they can form a local chapter of the association to promote and help us with the winners' concerts and that they will help us with the organizing receptions and care of the winners.

The most important feature of the Cliburn Competition is that we take care of the laureates and manage their tours for two years. For that, we need a wide support system. Eventually, we hope to do that.

AT: Can you tell the Japanese readers about the screening process for pianists who want to be accepted for Van Cliburn Competition?

RR: Yes, up to now, the process was video application and screening. In video screening, we had halls rented and one fixed video camera set up to show upper torso and hands and I can say that all objective criteria, that is sound quality, picture shots, everything was excellent. However, the subjective criteria, that is the feeling you have when somebody walks out on stage, that something special that you know in anticipation that the person walking out has some extra magic..., that is impossible to capture on video. So, we decided against video screening and do everything "live". We felt that on previous occasion, some of our prize winners got into the competition just barely, really as if just by luck. Looking back at videos, some of the most talented people barely got in, and so to avoid this, we decided to do all auditions "live". In fact, our gold medallist was one of the last people chosen to be able to participate in the competition. In the last fourth elimination round, he just barely sneaked in... With any tape or video, it is not like being "there" in person.

AT: And of course just looking at hands, every pianist has different hand structure and hand position, and for the audition judges, who see only the hands, they will immediately be prejudiced by that fact alone, especially if the hand position is contrary to the style they are used to, and so, they will disqualify the applicant immediately by that fact alone. Hand positions are very subjective and individual.

RR: Yes. One thing I found useful about video screening as opposed to audio screening was that it was a helpful tool in keeping the judges concentrated. When these judges sit in the room for hours and listen to audio tapes over and over, it becomes so boring for them that their minds wander away from music, and to have video tape was a visual focus to keep them concentrated. It was Abbey Simon on the jury who primarily said, "Please, go live next time." And yes, it is so much better. The live screening for 1997 Cliburn Competition will take place in Utrecht (Netherlands) for Northern Europe, and Milan (Italy) for Southern Europe. Also, we will go to Moscow (Russia) for Eastern Europe, and after that, we go to New York, Chicago, and Fort Worth. We are cutting back so not to waste too much time of the jurors. We have the same jurors traveling to all the places. We feel that we must have the same ears for the complete screening process. So, because of that, we cut down the number of places to accommodate judges' schedules.

AT: Will there be a screening audition in Japan?

RR: No, not in Japan because we have found that so many of the more advanced Japanese pianists are in Europe or somewhere else...and not in Japan. And for those "two or three" Japanese that are left there, we will accept video if they absolutely cannot travel to one of the cities. We will also accept video from South America, but again, there are very, very few left. Unfortunately, these are the realities. Actually, we have even set up a modest financial aid for those who have difficulties in traveling to one of the cities.

AT: From whom will the screening committee consist of?

RR: ...we just lost one, Ed Gordon, who was director of Ravinia Festival near Chicago. He died. Ed Gordon was a wonderful jury member, a fine pianist and a very good administrator and our personal friend. It is always very difficult to replace such people... He was the one who brought

in James Levine... Originally, we had three: Cecil Ousset, Jerome Lowenthal, and Ed Gordon. In addition, we have the chairman of the jury committee for Cliburn Competition, and then me, as the Executive Director of the competition.

AT: When I was studying for my doctorate at Northwestern University, one of my professors, Araand Parsons, used to write program notes for the Ravinia Festival. He also used to write notes for Chicago Symphony Orchestra concerts in Chicago.

RR: It is very difficult to find a good writer for programs. So many people are knowledgeable, but become so pedantic and start talking about things that don't inspire the audience. We here had a good writer who also wrote for Carnegie Hall. The trouble was that he had perfect pitch and so for him, everything is tonal relationship. He would suddenly write about G major section, or any other key, and I have to say "so what" for the average person. It is so hard to find that person who will write something that after you finish reading, your reaction will be that you will be eager and dying to hear that piece! The writing should inspire the reader.

AT: Yes...and even for professional musicians, reading program notes should be inspiring and should open a new perspective to the music. There is always room to know about other people's views of the same music and we should enrich our view with other ideas...it is much like a prism: one source of light, yet there are many colors in that white light...somehow different ideas are all connected to the one source and they are part of it. When I lived in Chicago, I collected all program notes written by Araand Parsons for the sake of knowledge. To read what others have to offer. I believe that somehow we are all related to history and so we should understand and know (music) history. Our playing reflects more than our personal feelings. Somehow there is a historical connection and we must understand from where we are coming and where we want to go. So many performers now just concentrate on their own performances...I think that we must be more than just pianists...we must represent some higher truths...

RR: Yes, it should be so.

AT: We should not be self-centered in our performances.

RR: That reminds me of Chopin Competition in Warsaw. Did you go there?

AT: No, but I know that a lot was written about it in Japan, including some articles written under pseudonyms because the authors were afraid of retribution. It was written that one of the jury members was dozing and sleeping so often, that others wondered how could she contribute to any judging. It was also written that the Japanese girl was giving very elaborate parties.

RR: I have here another scathing article about this girl and her parties. It was a terrible article about the whole Japanese establishment and how they send students to study with the judges prior to the competition. Probably the truth lies somewhere in between but there are some elements of truth in these articles.

AT: Then, I want to ask you about the Tchaikovsky competition. Of course before the Perestroika, the competition was heavily influenced by political decisions and the many judges leaned in their decisions towards one side. However, now, the Tchaikovsky competition is influenced by various sponsors who contribute money which is so needed for that competition's continuance.

RR: Yes, it is having a lot of problems. But I also remember that when Cliburn won the first prize, there were so many problems. The chairman of the jury phoned the Minister of Culture, Madame Furtsova saying that Cliburn had such enormous support from all jury that they didn't know what to do. Before the competition, they were supposed to pick a Russian winner, however, because of van Cliburn, they could not do so. The whole matter ended by going to then Soviet

leader, Nikita Khrushchev who said that whoever plays better deserves the first prize irrespective of his or her nationality.

AT: And a similar thing happened when Vladimir Ashkenazy won the first prize at Queen Elizabeth Competition in Brussels. The Eastern block judges were instructed to give the 1st prize to a Russian, however, when the Russian pianists, including Ashkenazy, played badly at some point as to exclude them from definite 1st prize, Emil Gilels, the famous pianist and one of the jury members phoned Kremlin to ask what to do and he was instructed to bargain with the jury that those who vote for a Russian will be invited as jury members for the next Tchaikovsky competition.

RR: And the last Tchaikovsky competition was a mess, too, because you know, that all the judges were laureates and winners of previous Tchaikovsky competitions and it became a psychological thing for judges to think that a competitor isn't playing as well as the "judge" did when he or she had won. It is a terrible thing to invite laureates. We like our system here at Cliburn because it is very, very clean. The moment I feel that there is something going on, and there was only once a tiny thing, but I immediately take measures to stop it. Of course, there is no point system which is a much better way to judge. We ask the judges to keep in mind 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place prizes all the time. The biggest thing I have about Cliburn competition is that we do believe that the cream (the best) somehow do get to the top. But within that cream, to say that 1st prize-winner is better than the 2nd, or better than the 3rd, is nonsense. Very, very rarely do you have someone like Ashkenazy, Argerich or Pollini but with all others, it is a big group. We have to de-emphasize the difference between them. What we have done is to have eliminated 4th, 5th, and 6th place winners. All that these prizes do is to create pain. A 6th prize winner feels awful that he didn't win 5th place, and so on. It just hurts. Moreover, it doesn't help his career, and it doesn't help us at the Foundation. And for the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, we always emphasize that the prizes are what the jury suggested. We view the prizes as recommendations to play with various orchestras. So, for example, when we were asked to send a young prize winner to play with Tulsa Symphony Orchestra, we suggested to the conductor that he should come to hear the contestants himself and choose whom he wants, and not necessarily from the top three winners. In fact, in our last competition, we had a contestant who was eliminated in the semi-finals. However, he was noticed and was picked up by management and has done recordings already.

AT: I understand. I was a contestant at the International Ivo Pogorelich Piano Competition, which as you know, was a very difficult competition to be chosen to. The prize there was a huge \$100,000, but, no concert tours.

RR: And here it is the opposite. We do not have a big financial prize, but we offer tours and manage their concerts. When we started, the 1st prize was \$10,000 which was a big prize at that time, but now, not so. Now we have thought of whether we should increase the money prize from 15,000 to 20 or to 25,000, but have decided against it. In this, we are also supported by Van Cliburn. He felt that we should not be the highest paying competition; that we have already established what we can do and primarily we offer tours. We open the doors.

AT: I want to ask you about the relationship between Cliburn Competition and the TCU (Texas Christian University) summer Master Class series.

RR: At first, the Master Class series was held only at the time of the competition and the judges used to give master classes during that period. It is only recently, that the master classes have become annual. But the tradition still continues that during the competition year, the judges are invited to give master classes for TCU summer institute. It also is much less expensive for TCU

because the judges/master class teachers are already here and they do not have to be flown in as during non-competition years. The master class series begins two or three days before the competition and runs through the whole competition period. The way that it is setup is that there is no conflict between master classes and the competition. When the competition is on, then, there are no master classes.

AT: As for the competition, can you please tell the readers in what direction it is going, and if so, from which direction is it coming. Do you see some trend?

RR: Yes...it is a slow maturation. One of the main changes that is developing is we are regarding all the pianist who take part here in the competition not as people who are still in school who are playing to prove that they can play a little bit of Bach or a little of Mozart..., but rather who are young professionals who pretty much know what their forte (strong points) are. So, like for the last competition, there was Christopher Taylor who plays Messiaen, Boulez, or Beethoven's op. 111 or Bach's Goldberg Variations...and then we had Frederic Chiu who plays nothing but romantic repertoire. It is more difficult for the jury, because you are matching different kinds of repertoire, but it is ok. But, it allows the young pianist to do what he believes he does the best. All the pianists who come here can play the piano very, very well. We know that. We are looking for who is making the music.

AT: Looking backwards, are there some things that you would have like to change? Are there any regrets?

RR: ...no, I wasn't here earlier. Since I came here, I think we have been moving in the right direction. One thing that would be nice to have is a little more rehearsal time. You know when one gets into chamber music or even concerti how important it is to have rehearsals. But it is not practical. Even at this point, the jury have to spend here two weeks, and to extend it even by a few more days is very impractical, especially because during rehearsals the jury has nothing to do. But overall, it is not so important. The conductor knows his material very well and the jury are not looking for a uniform and balanced performance. What the conductor and orchestra are doing is accompanying the pianist so that his or her personality comes forward.

AT: How do you preserve the integrity of the Cliburn competition?

RR: It is critical to be "lily-white", to be crystal pure. Fortunately, we haven't had many problems. The last time I heard of problems were during communist era when there was a little undue pressure from Soviet jurors. Since 1989, it has been very clean. I remember that a few years ago, I went to Russia to arrange our screening process, we were told that the Russians themselves want to select and send the pianists to Cliburn Competition. I said that this could not be done because we don't have any national quotas. So, for instance, if we do not hear any good pianists in England, but five good ones in France, we will take no English, but five Frenchmen. And the same applies to Russia. We, not the Russians, have to make our choices. If the Russian applicants are all good, we might take all. Then, the Russian committee asked me what guarantee do they have that the Cliburn people will not deliberately select the worst Russian pianists? I replied that those days of political intrigue are over and that in America, there was never such a tendency. That I didn't care what political or national background the contestant came from. The important thing is that they play the piano. Take my word for it, or don't have any business. In the end, they gave us six pianists and we took four. I should also add that talking to various students in the (Russian) conservatories, the pre-screening process was very well handled and without any prejudice. So basically, we didn't have strict guidelines for juries but they cannot

have had teaching relations with the contestant...and of course, to refrain from attending parties “held by students!” And although the voting is “yes” or “no”, we also have a complicated computer system. The jury are asked at each stage to mark who they think is the grand prize winner and as a result, if more than two people vote for a contestant that was disqualified by the majority, the computer signals that there has to be a discussion. By this process, we want to make sure that the very, very original candidate was not disqualified in the jury voting system. But, the most interesting thing that we did is that we had a secondary voting system which wasn’t used to tabulate the actual outcome. Each jury gave contestants points from 1 to 7 and then we normalize the range, canceling the lowest and the highest. Then, we compared the results with actual vote and there were no differences.

AT: Well...thank you very much for these insights. They were very interesting.

RR: ...I thank you. My pleasure.