

An Easter Sermon
Sunday, March 23, 2008
by Dr. Frank Trotter

William Butler Yeats, the famous 20th century Irish poet, once wrote,
“I can see nothing plain; all’s mystery.
Yet sometimes there’s a torch inside my head
That makes all clear, but when the light is gone
I have but images, analogies.”¹

In a sense, that is how preachers feel on Easter Sunday morning!

“How do we tell you about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead?” preachers ask themselves. The truth is that we can see nothing much plainer than most congregations. It’s all mystery to us, too. And yet, there is a torch inside our heads and hearts on this Easter morning that somehow illuminates this amazing story, even if all we have to work with is images and analogies.

On this good Easter, the analogy that has come to me is a musical one, that of an overture – defined as a composition that summarizes all of the major themes that are to follow; on a wider basis, an overture is “an opening move toward negotiations, a new relationship or agreement...” I would suggest to you that the story of the resurrection is the story of overtures made, of risks taken by the Almighty.

Fifty years ago next month, a shy 23-year-old from Fort Worth, Texas, got on a plane to Moscow at the height of the Cold War. His name was Van Cliburn, one of America’s most talented young pianists, and he was seeking to do something that almost everyone thought was a waste of time. He had entered the first International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition and few thought there was little chance that an American would be allowed to win any of the prizes, let alone the top prize.

In the year 1958, Americans and Soviets were arguing with great heat over everything – Berlin, nuclear tests, and, of course, the space race. Only six months earlier, the Soviet Union had shocked the world when it announced

¹ William Butler Yeats, quoted in *In the Stillness Is the Dancing* by Mark Link, S.J. (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1972), 85.

the launch of Sputnik I, the very first satellite to be successfully placed in earth orbit. Coupled with this great technological advance, the International Tchaikovsky Competition was designed to demonstrate Soviet cultural superiority. After all, in a country that had produced Vladimir Horowitz, arguably the greatest pianist of the twentieth century, who could imagine that a Russian would not win?

Some intuition, some voice spoke to Van Cliburn telling him to go and see what would happen. In an interview on National Public Radio earlier this month, he said, “The memories are so vivid... I remember the evening I arrived [in Moscow, on] March 26, 1958 — people were so friendly. One of the landmarks of the world that I had treasured the memory of seeing, when I was 5 years old, in a child’s history book of the world was the gorgeous photograph of the church of St. Basil. And so I asked this very nice lady from the Ministry of Culture if it was possible to pass by and see the church. She said, ‘Of course,’ and so we drove past it, and I felt like a dream had come true.”²

Two evenings later, Cliburn was taken for his first scheduled rehearsal time at the great Bolshoi Hall of the Conservatory which, he said, is “hallowed ground” for musicians and composers around the world. He said, “So many of the famous composers and instrumentalists have played there. It’s just a remarkable place. The audiences are fantastic. To know that these people knew all of this music and for them to be interested in what I had to say about the compositions, that’s a thrill.”³

As the competition opened, Cliburn chose Tchaikovsky’s “Piano Concerto No. 1” for his first selection. Audiences were stunned by the power and interpretation he brought to the performance. Within a few days, the Russian people took his name “Van” and began referring to him affectionately as “Vanya.” When he was named a finalist, he chose Rachmaninoff’s “Piano Concerto No. 3” as his closing selection. As the music came to an end on that historic evening of April 14, 1958, the Russian audience in the Bolshoi Hall of the Conservatory jumped to their feet and

² “Van Cliburn: Treasuring Moscow After 50 Years,” Interview with Scott Simon, *Weekend Edition Saturday*, National Public Radio, March 1, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87771963>.

³ Ibid.

gave him an eight minute standing ovation – a portion of which you can watch on “You Tube”⁴ if you type in “Van Cliburn.”

In the face of the overwhelming audience approval of Cliburn’s performances, the competition’s judges did not know what to do. The story is that “they reportedly asked Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev if they could really give first place to an American. Khrushchev replied, ‘Is he the best piano player? Then give it to him.’”⁵ By the way, in that same “You Tube” video clip, you can briefly see Khrushchev during the standing ovation.

When Cliburn returned to the United States following his tumultuous two and a half weeks in Moscow, he was received as a hero with a ticker-tape parade in New York City. His recording on Columbia Records of “Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1” became the first classical recording to sell more than a million copies. And in something of a surprise to everyone, including himself, he “became something of a diplomat, striking a chord that connected common people from two countries that were bitter enemies.”⁶

Cliburn is not, of course, alone in making dramatic overtures through the power of music. Only two years before this historic event, the Boston Symphony performed in Moscow in September 1956 and was the first major U.S. orchestra to visit the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Seventeen years later, the Philadelphia Orchestra made an unprecedented trip to China. And on February 26th of last month, Conductor Loren Maazel led a historic concert when the New York Philharmonic became the first American orchestra to ever play in Pyongyang, North Korea.⁷

Not everyone was enthusiastic about the idea of the Philharmonic going to Pyongyang. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, herself an accomplished pianist, said, “I don’t think we should get carried away with what listening to Dvorak is going to do in North Korea.”⁸ However, the idea for the invitation

⁴ To watch a video clip of Cliburn’s famous performance in Moscow, go to “You Tube” – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7MAriotZyE&feature=related>.

⁵ “Van Cliburn: Treasuring Moscow After 50 Years,” National Public Radio (see footnote #1 above).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ To listen to the entire concert, go to:

<http://www.wnyc.org/flashpop.html?playlist=%2Fstream%2Fxsfp%2F94253>.

⁸ Condoleezza Rice, quoted in “Catching a Streamed-In Philharmonic Live from North Korea,” by Anthony Tommasini, *New York Times*, February 27, 2008,

actually originated when an American envoy from the State Department discussed the possibility of cultural exchanges last summer with his North Korean counterpart in an effort to improve relations.⁹

If the visit was ground breaking, Maazel chose a fairly traditional evening of music that included Dvorak's "New World Symphony" and George Gershwin's "An American in Paris." When he introduced the Gershwin, he joked with the audience and said, "Someday a composer may write a work entitled, 'Americans in Pyongyang.'"¹⁰ He was greeted with laughter and applause.

Perhaps the long term effects of this remarkable overture were less tangible. John Deak, the Philharmonic's principal bassist, says that the most moving moment for him came after the final encore had been played, a traditional Korean folk song called "Arirang" which "depicts in its text a man and a woman who were torn apart by circumstances beyond their control."¹¹ Deak suggests that Maazel chose the piece because of its obvious symbolism of the separation between the North and South Koreans that has existed since the Korean War.

As the orchestra members were leaving the stage, they suddenly became aware that many members of the audience were standing quietly in place, deeply moved by what they had heard. Deak says, "When I saw a woman's face and it looked like she was about to cry, I started to cry myself... Then this kind of outpouring was like the audience was catching their breath – 'Wait a minute, don't leave!' And that's the strong thing I got from them. And I felt exactly the same thing: 'Wait, we can't just get on the plane and leave. Something profound is happening here.'"¹²

If we are talking about historic overtures this morning, there is another overture that I would remind you of this morning that is more profound than

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/27/arts/music/27stre.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=New+York+Philharmonic+%2B+North+Korea&st=nyt&oref=slogin.

⁹ "Arts Briefly; New York Philharmonic Is Invited to North Korea," *New York Times*, August 14, 2007, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F07E0DE1130F937A2575BC0A9619C8B63&scp=2&sq=New+York+Philharmonic+%2B+North+Korea&st=nyt>.

¹⁰ "The New York Philharmonic in North Korea," WNYC – New York Public Radio, <http://www.wnyc.org/flashpop.html?playlist=%2Fstream%2Fxsfp%2F94253>.

¹¹ "Bassist Reflects on Taking Music to North Korea," Interview by Melissa Block, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Friday, March 7, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87991800>.

¹² Ibid.

them all. It is ancient, and yet brand new. It is acted out on an earthly stage, and yet it is framed with heavenly imagery from beginning to end. It is the Divine Overture – the magnificent story of how God chose to become one of us, of how God reached out to us through the incarnation, the life and ministry, the crucifixion and death, and the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from the dead. It is this story that Christians come to hear – not just on Easter, but on every Sunday of the year; for there is not a moment when we are not in need of hearing it and learning it over and over again.

One of my favorite musical jokes is based on the fact that historians have never known for sure where Mozart, one of the greatest musicians who ever lived, is buried. One day archeologists are digging near Vienna and suddenly break through an old earthen wall to discover Mozart, himself, sitting next to a pile of musical manuscripts with an eraser in his hand furiously erasing. “Maestro,” the archeologist cried out, “what are you doing?” “Isn’t it obvious?” Mozart answered. “I’m decomposing.”

We know that for many people today, belief in God has decomposed, has deteriorated from the faith that was once so vibrant and alive. But I am here to proclaim to you in the light of what God does on Easter Day, there is not a moment when we are not invited by God to be transformed; there is not a moment when we are not invited to join God in transforming the world and our faith, in allowing the old to pass away, in allowing what is new to come alive again in our hearts and in the world.

Anthony Tommasini, a music critic for the *New York Times*, quibbled a bit with Loren Maazel following the concert in Pyongyang. He said, “If only [Loren Maazel] had chosen to include even one short work by a living American composer, perhaps an Asian-American composer. Because the orchestra stuck to staples, the classical music art form came off as unthreatening. New music, by definition, is destabilizing.”¹³

The music of Easter Day is, by definition, destabilizing. Easter is about new risks, new relationships, new possibilities, new ministries, new hearts and lives – even across the boundaries of culture, nationality, socio-economic status, age or gender, race or ethnicity, sexual identification, or political

¹³ Ibid.

ideology. The church will not survive if it cannot reach out in ways it has never done before.

Martin Luther, that great man of faith, wrote a hymn for this day entitled “*Christ lag in Todesbanden*”:

Christ Jesus lay in death’s strong bands,
For our offenses given;
But now at God’s right hand he stands
And brings us life from heaven;
Therefore let us joyful be
And sing to God right thankfully
Loud songs of hallelujah. Hallelujah!¹⁴

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands” (“*Christ lag in Todesbanden*”), <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/c/j/cjlayind.htm>.