

## 13TH VAN CLIBURN INTERNATIONAL PIANO COMPETITION

### **For some pianists, play is key**

**The 29 competitors have been popping up all over town this week, squeezing in sightseeing and recitals at schools between practices.**

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FORT WORTH -- Ran Dank and Vassilis Varvaresos just landed in Texas last weekend, but on Tuesday morning they boarded another plane.

This time, the Juilliard pianists -- best friends and roommates in New York -- spent an hour touring the Metroplex in a six-passenger Piper Navajo while reigning Miss Texas Rebecca Robinson pointed out the biggest landmarks from her seat up front.

The 13th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition -- one of the world's premier classical music competitions -- begins Friday. And if brilliant pianists from around the world are going to come to Van Cliburn's adopted hometown, Fort Worth is determined to show them a good time.

The 29 competitors have been popping up all over town this week. Several have made the requisite trip for all Fort Worth newcomers: the patio at Joe T. Garcia's. Others have been herded over to Reata for a steak and a dose of Lone Star lavishness.

Should the competitors wish to explore the Metroplex, the Cliburn is -- for the first time this year -- providing social hosts, 20-somethings at the ready in case a pianist wants a restaurant recommendation or a companion for a visit to the museums or clubs in Fort Worth and Dallas.

A handful of Cliburn pianists are also dropping in on local schools this week, offering short recitals and answering students' questions about music. Andrea Lam, a 27-year-old Australia native who lives in New York, played for third-, fourth- and fifth-graders Monday at Fort Worth's Versia Williams Elementary.

"We are in for a treat today," Principal Carlos Meekins told the 225 students wriggling in their squeaky auditorium chairs. Lam played them Robert Schumann and Enrique Granados, then took their questions: When did you learn how to play? How long did it take you to get good? What is your favorite song ever?

"I hope you win," one student called out to Lam as she waved goodbye.

On Tuesday morning, as the small plane dipped down to circle downtown Dallas at 2,000 feet, Dank and Varvaresos peered out the window to see the tops of buildings just below. Robert Petrie -- the plane's owner and a friend of Dank's host family, Tim and Susan Matheus -- had planned to stop off for barbecue in Weatherford. But there was no time to land: Varvaresos had to be back at Bass Hall by noon to choose which piano he'll play in the most important contest of his life.

### **Forgoing fun for practice**

Amid all the excitement of their arrival, it's easy to forget that these musicians have worked years for the chance to perform for the Cliburn jury. Some of them haven't stopped practicing since they arrived at their host families' homes.

Besides a couple of small performances Tuesday, returning competitor Ang Li has stayed close to home since she arrived, said her host, Mary Dulle.

"She practices about 90 percent of the time," Dulle said as the sound of a Steinway in the next room floated over the phone line.

Not that there aren't temptations.

Garrett and Bonnie Tucker had arranged for their guest, Bulgarian competitor Evgeni Bozhanov, to throw out the first pitch at the Fort Worth Cats game Tuesday night after they learned that he had never been to a baseball game.

But Tuesday afternoon, Bozhanov decided that he needed the time to practice, so Garrett Tucker canceled -- and said he understood completely.

"He's down here to play piano, not watch baseball," Tucker said.

Varvaresos, meanwhile, is determined to make the most of his free time in Texas. Already, the Greek pianist has told his host, Andrew Power, one of his goals: "I want to shoot a gun." Hey, he lives in New York, he said. If not now, when will he get the chance?

"I have a one-word philosophy: chillaxing," said Varvaresos, leaning back on the plane, sunglasses he borrowed from Miss Texas propped up on his forehead.

Never mind that he has competed and excelled his whole life, that he's working on a doctorate at Juilliard and that he's preparing for the biggest competition of his career. He's in Texas. It's late spring. And for just a moment, he's floating in the sky over Cowtown with nothing to do but enjoy himself.

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