

## John Browning

### Piano virtuoso of the new world

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"Mr Browning comes as close to perfection as one would hope to hear in this world." So said the New York Times of the American pianist John Browning, who has died of heart failure aged 69.

Until the advent of William Kapell, who was killed in an air crash in 1953 at the age of 31, America's great pianists had been European émigrés. Browning belonged to the postwar generation of homegrown pioneers, such as Gary Graffman, Leon Fleisher, Byron Janis and Van Cliburn, and was particularly celebrated for having given the world premiere in 1962 of Samuel Barber's Pulitzer prizewinning piano concerto, written especially for him.

Browning was born in Denver, Colorado, and first appeared as soloist with the Denver Symphony Orchestra at the age of 10. His pianist mother had been a pupil of the great Russian pedagogue Theodor Leschetizky (also the teacher of Paderewski and Schnabel); Browning, too, trained in the Russian tradition, with Joseph and Rosina Lhévinne, after his family moved to Los Angeles in 1945. Lhévinne invited him to study with her at the Juilliard school in New York, and he joined the college in 1950.

A string of international prizes - the Steinway award (1954), the Leventritt competition (1955) and second prize at the Queen Elisabeth competition, Brussels (1956) - ensured that Browning was well known by the time Van Cliburn became a national hero after winning the 1958 Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow. As an American triumphant in Russia at the height of the cold war, Van Cliburn acquired a fame that subsequently overshadowed Browning in the public view.

Nevertheless, Browning remained in great demand for his intense, yet beautifully controlled, playing, and was soon giving around 100 concerts a year. He went on to enjoy his own moment of success in the Soviet Union, with a highly acclaimed tour in 1965, when such visits were still relatively unusual.

Samuel Barber first heard Browning in 1956, in his debut with the New York Philharmonic under Dmitry Mitropoulos. Barber was so impressed that he asked Browning to visit him and play through his massive piano sonata, composed for Vladimir Horowitz; later, when commissioned to compose a work for the opening of Lincoln Center in New York, Barber wrote his piano concerto with Browning in mind.

Browning recorded it two years after giving its world premiere, and again in 1991 (with Leonard Slatkin conducting the St Louis Symphony Orchestra); the latter won a Grammy award. Another Grammy followed in 1993 for his recording of solo piano works by Barber, and he recorded the complete concertos by Prokofiev.

In the 1970s, Browning had struck a midlife crisis that rebounded with unfortunate effect on his career; its renaissance, in the 1990s, was hard won, as musical establishment figures judged him perhaps too harshly for that episode of apparent unreliability. His admirers, however, continued to recognise his special qualities - his towering technical ability always at the service of intelligent interpretation, his unfailing clarity of line, and his cohesive sense of purpose in music ranging from Bach through Liszt to contemporary composers such as Ned Rorem. His other recordings include a fine account of the Chopin études, a selection of Scarlatti sonatas, the Beethoven triple concerto and a collection of Barber songs, with Thomas Hampson and Cheryl Studer.

Patrick Garvey, Browning's British agent, remembers him as someone of great charm, with a constant twinkle in the eye and a wickedly irreverent sense of humour. His dog - a papillon named Mimi - went everywhere with him, as had her predecessor, Tyler. "I once met him for dinner at a restaurant in Amsterdam," Garvey recounts, "and he brought Tyler along, concealed in a shoulder bag."

John Browning, pianist, born May 23 1933; died January 26 2003