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Hostess is Jade for television

By ALYSON WARD

Jade Simmons clears her throat, then coughs just a few more times for good measure. She gives one more glance at the pink clipboard in her lap full of notes and pianist biographies. And as the seconds tick down, she arranges herself and prepares to address the thousands of viewers tuning in to the Cliburn's webcast.

The camera goes on. Simmons gives a broad smile.

"See, I knew you would be addicted now to the live broadcast of the 13th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition," she says, then launches into an introduction of Ang Li, Monday night's first performer.

Simmons, the Cliburn's first webcast host, is spending the two-and-a-half weeks of the competition with a microphone attached to her collar, perched on a velvet-covered chair in Box AA, just over the pianists' right shoulders. She's the face the Cliburn's online viewers see before and after every performance, filling in the space between performers with color commentary and analysis and interviewing some of the competition's key behind-the-scenes faces.

It's got to be hard to find someone who sparkles in front of the camera and knows classical music backward and forward, but the Cliburn found exactly what its webcast needed. Simmons, 31, is a pianist who's played 45 concert dates this season, released a CD this spring, and has her hand in a wide variety of artist development and outreach projects that place her on classical music's cutting edge.

Simmons, who lives in Houston and has degrees from Northwestern and Rice University, made it to the Cliburn screening auditions four years ago. And she's a former Miss Illinois (she played Chopin at the 2000 Miss America pageant), which has given her the poise she needs to ad-lib about Bach and Beethoven on a live broadcast.

And that's what has made the webcast so interesting to watch during the Cliburn's preliminary round. Instead of filling the time with meaningless blather, Simmons consistently offers up interesting tidbits on the performers and the programs they've selected.



Viewers learn why a particular piece is an unusual choice for a Cliburn pianist to play, or they find out they're about to hear the same sonata another competitor played earlier in the day.

"It's fun for me to get to talk about the repertoire," Simmons says. As a pianist, she's familiar with almost all of the pieces this year's Cliburn competitors are playing – if she hasn't played it herself, she's at least familiar with the work and the composer.

And though she'll offer praise when she hears a performer who really moves her, Simmons is determined not to pick favorites.

"I am not here as a critic," she says. "There's enough of that. My job here is to talk about how wonderful these pianists are just for getting to this stage."

Meanwhile, Simmons is using the Cliburn webcast as a vehicle to interact personally with piano fans. She's blogging her thoughts about the competition (Keeping up with the Cliburn: <http://jade-cliburn.livejournal.com/>).

For those who can't be inside Bass Hall, though, Simmons is offering a solid glimpse of what's going on at the Cliburn, on stage and behind the scenes. Her live commentary is giving long-distance piano fans a much-needed window on the competition.

Monday night, as applause dies down for Ang Li and a new 9-foot Steinway is rolled onto the stage, Simmons welcomes Cliburn gift shop chairman Kathryn Laughlin to the cramped, camera- and wire-filled box. Laughlin settles into her chair, the camera starts rolling, and Simmons, her big gold earrings dangling, smiles again and introduces her guest.

"Before we get started, tell me about the volunteers," she tells Laughlin, and the Cliburn's Jade show begins again.