

# Sergei Rachmaninoff and the Selfish Lady at Carnegie Hall

By Phyllis Chesler

What has become of classical concert-goers in Manhattan? One would think that they'd be polite, soft-spoken, genteel, even gracious—but you'd be wrong. Other than the many Koreans and Chinese who came to hear one of their own—the mainly Caucasian crowd pushed, shoved, mobbed, and blasted each other. Getting into the elevator, one woman at the back loudly demanded that more and more passengers be allowed into an already packed car; another masked woman also thunderously and nastily warned me “to keep away from her with my walker because she'd just had two knees replaced.” I think she was really scared, but she certainly wasn't nice.

Last night was my friend Merle Hoffman's birthday and so, at her request, we dined at the Russian Tea Room before attending a concert at Carnegie Hall. What can I say? I've been going to the Tea Room since the late 1950s/early 1960s, and the decor remains almost the same: Czarist and opulent, but the food was not as good. I've attended concerts at Carnegie Hall for a long, long time, and this one was spectacular. The London Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Sir Antonio Pappano, joined Yunchan Lim in a performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No 2 in C Minor, Op 18.

In 2022, Lim was only eighteen years old, and the youngest person ever to win gold at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. He was an immediate sensation and is now an international superstar. Last night, his technique was flawless, almost magical. He had a way of playing softly, so softly when the music required it—that his liquid soft notes lingered afterwards in the very air. The Concerto is known for its dramatic and unrelenting intensity, and Lim was more than

equal to the task.

The program reminded me that Rachmaninoff fought off depression (“a paralyzing apathy”), after the “disastrous premiere of his First Symphony, during which he fled from the hall in horror, later destroying the score.” The reviews savaged the piece. His friends talked him into seeing a psychotherapist who was also a hypnotist—and it worked. (Gustav Mahler saw Sigmund Freud). Although still filled with self-doubt, Rachmaninoff began working on this masterwork. The program notes that this concerto “must surely stand as one of the most impressive early advertisements for psychotherapy.”

But here’s what happened to me last night. I could not navigate the Dress Circle seats we had. To reach them meant climbing down a steep flight of stairs and then clambering down even further to reach a distant wall on the right. Okay. It is what it is. After three surgeries, I use a walker. And so, I asked the friendly and helpful usher to help. Could we offer our seats to those who had booked the still empty seats in the back row? (Two remained empty). She suggested moving a chair over to the back row right next to a woman who was also seated in a free-standing chair at the end of that row. There, I could at least see the orchestra in full plumage. But the woman, whose face I never saw, a very thin and fidgety figure, refused. We were all shocked. It was unfriendly, unfeeling, and selfish. But again, human nature can go either way. The usher offered to talk to her manager to work something out. I told her not to bother.

Two of us sat against the wall; one of us slowly, and with great difficulty, made her way down to one of the assigned seats. I could see nothing, but I could hear it all. From time to time, I stood and snatched glimpses of the orchestra, their conductor, and our star pianist. And then I noticed the selfish lady. She essentially expanded her domain to the equivalent of two seats. She first put her bag down on one side, then on the other. She took her shoes off and put them

on again. She crossed her legs, first to one side, then to the other, and actually ended up blocking the exit path with her foot, something that was not allowed. I took some photos. Here they are.



Without her shoes



Blocking the aisle

We left at the intermission after an encore performance by Lim—and unfortunately before the second half of Rachmaninoff's masterpiece and before he played William Walton's Symphony No 1. Next time, if there is a next time, I will only get tickets for the Orchestra—if and when possible.

The good news: People in this once fair city of ours, and at a time when films like *Anora* and *No Other Land* win awards; at a time when the up-and-coming generations text obsessively, and prefer visual education to the written word; at a time when so much violence and exceedingly bad behavior prevails—some of us still like classical music and will turn out in huge numbers to hear and watch live performances.

*First published in [Phyllis' Newsletter](#)*