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Sounds, good and bad

by Jay Nordlinger

Stern Auditorium at Carnegie Hall; photo: npr.org

A couple of weeks ago, Carnegie Hall staged a "neighborhood concert," at a church on the Upper West Side. The concert was a voice recital, featuring Nathaniel Olson, a young baritone from Indiana University. At the piano was Kevin Murphy, a teacher of his—and the husband of the famous soprano Heidi Grant Murphy, and a good friend of mine.

Olson owns a truly beautiful voice, a voice with a glow in it. Not all beautiful voices have glows in them, but some of them do. I think of Robert Lloyd, the British bass. I once said to him, "I don't know how that glow got in your voice, but it's there." He did not protest or demur or say "Aw, shucks." Instead, he said, "I don't know how it got there either. It's just a gift. Has always been there."

I liked that. I liked the man's straightforwardness, his matter-of-factness.

The Olson-Murphy recital was free, by the way—and the church was packed. In the middle of the recital, a politician came out to make remarks. It was Gale Brewer, the Manhattan borough president. I'm not sure what the government—any level of it—had to do with this recital, but Brewer was there. She told people to demand of officeholders that they support the arts, so that events can be free.

By "support the arts," of course, people mean require the taxpayer to fund them. And no event is really "free," as you know. Someone pays.

A few days later, I was in Philadelphia, where another friend of mine, Ignat Solzhenitsyn, was giving a piano recital. It was an all-Prokofiev program, consisting of the three "war sonatas"—i.e., Nos. 6, 7, and 8. As someone remarked to me later, they are rarely played as a group. Nor are they much recorded as a group. This is surprising, because the grouping seems a natural.

Do the three sonatas, in a row, constitute too much Prokofiev? No, really—they work well.

And Solzhenitsyn played them superbly. He played them with great power: physical, mental, and emotional. You are welcome to discount my judgment, because the pianist is my friend, but it's still true.

The recital took place in the Perelman Theater, a venue in the Kimmel Center. It is a "loud" hall, rather like Zankel, which is in the "basement" of Carnegie Hall. It is "exposed," "live." Every twitch seems to ring out.

In back of me, a woman was nervously and unconsciously rubbing her program. It was a paper program. It would have been so much nicer if she had rubbed a hanky or something. She could have rubbed, and been noiseless.

Off to the left of me, a man sucked on his teeth, periodically, all through the recital. He made these sucking chirps. Every minute and a half or so, there'd be a sucking chirp. Many years ago, I was at the Metropolitan Opera, and a man behind me sucked continually. I think I left early.

What did Ross Perot say, during the 1992 campaign? He spoke of a "giant sucking sound." I know just what he means.

Audience noises—audience nuisances—are many and varied. There are cellphones, of course. But worse than the ringing of a cellphone is the clucking and scolding that follows it. The guy feels bad enough already, probably. But other audience members have to pile on, and add to the disruption.

There is heavy breathing—labored breathing. There is snoring. And there are other kinds of noisy sleeping.

There is the unwrapping of candies, lozenges, and the like. And there is the playing with those wrappers, after the unwrapping. The fondling of them.

You have coughing. And you have talking.

But now I'm getting to the big two—the two worst audience noises or nuisances. I speak of plastic bags and hearing aids. Errant, wayward, singing hearing aids.

A plastic bag is an amazingly ruinous object in a concert hall or opera house. The crinkles are absolutely deafening. One afternoon at City Opera, a woman behind me was playing with a plastic bag—non-stop. Just kneading it unconsciously, the way the woman in Philadelphia was rubbing her program.

Three or four seats over to my left, a fellow critic of mine, Robert Hilferty, was sitting. He beseeched me—commanded me—to turn around and grab the bag from the woman. He looked like he was about to leap over the seats himself. I forget what happened, in the end.

And hearing aids! I think they may be the worst—faulty hearing aids. The wearer can't tell that the aid has gone haywire. The devices sing and pierce. I feel sorry for the wearer—he has done nothing wrong, but his device has.

One time, Dawn Upshaw, the soprano, stopped her recital, because of this problem. Another time, a hearing aid sang and pierced throughout an entire Metropolitan Opera Orchestra concert. As I remember, the hearing aid would not make a sound when there was silence—such as between movements of a symphony. It sang only when there was music from the stage. I think the music set off the hearing aid.

Years before *that*, I was at a *Tristan*—or was it *Parsifal*?—where a hearing aid sang and whistled and pierced for a full two acts. Some members of the audience were homicidal. They were semi-assaulting the ushers, who could not locate the offending instrument, or its wearer.

I have a friend, a regular concertgoer, whose ideal is this: He would like to attend live performances—because they are so much better than, or at least different from, recordings—without an audience. He loves live, but he doesn't love audiences, and their noises and nuisances. He envisions himself alone in the hall, listening to the live performances.

That is something a very rich man might be able to arrange! Some combination of Trump and Esterházy . . .

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found here.