

Supporting Cast

Yunchan Lim is one of the world’s most famous pianists – and his legions of devoted fans are there for every note, reports **Simon Broughton**

‘The primary reason I go to concerts is to see him play, but it’s also because there are a lot of fans who come from around the world, and we have a drink afterwards and talk about the music. So, when I went to the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam there were about 30 people I knew in the front row.’

These are the words of Jing Zhu, born in China but living and working in London – and to say she’s a fan of Korean pianist Yunchan Lim would be something of an understatement. She’s been to 47 of Yunchan’s concerts in 21 cities and ten countries. And that includes 11 performances of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*! ‘Yunchan plays each recital completely differently,’ she says. ‘In Princeton – the third time he’d played the *Goldbergs* – he played the Fifth Variation really slowly. It’s the only time I’ve heard him do that. The allure you get from that is endless. He makes you think about the music and the composer and his intentions.’

A quick reminder of the phenomenon that is Yunchan Lim, aged 22. He came to worldwide attention in 2022 as the youngest ever winner, aged 18, of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Fort Worth, Texas. The video of his performance of Rachmaninov’s Third Piano Concerto in the final has been viewed over 19 million times – by comparison, Martha Argerich and Vladimir Horowitz in the same piece are at about five million each. Yunchan’s debut album of Chopin’s *Études* on Decca won three BBC Music Magazine Awards: Recording of the Year, Newcomer and Instrumental. In February, when the Official Classical Chart was launched, his recording of the *Goldberg Variations* went straight in at Number 1. Yunchan was the fastest-selling BBC Proms

debut of 2024, and his 2025 performance of Rachmaninov’s Fourth Concerto was a sell-out. This year he’ll play the Ravel G major Concerto on the First Night (17 July).

It was in a bar around the corner from the Royal Albert Hall that I met up with 20-or-so Yunchan fans after the 2025 concert. The rendezvous had been announced on Facebook’s Yunchan Lim Fan Group, with well over 20,000 members and growing. It was 18,000 a couple of months before. There isn’t anyone else in classical music with a fandom

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like this. Apart from the numbers, what’s impressive is that the people there weren’t just smitten groupies, but had serious things to say about the performance or why they admire him. ‘I like the way he appears so shy and demure when he comes on stage, but when he plays the piano he unzips his chest and everything comes out!’ says Merete Gardiner, Oxford resident, originally from Copenhagen.

‘I discovered Yunchan from an article in *The Sunday Times* (April 2024) about his Rach 3 performance and I went on YouTube and woah,’ she says. ‘I didn’t go out that day. I listened to everything else from the Cliburn and whatever else I could find. I was amazed and I have been ever since.’ Being retired, she also travels to see his concerts. The furthest was for Bartók’s Third Piano Concerto in Philadelphia. ‘I don’t want to come across



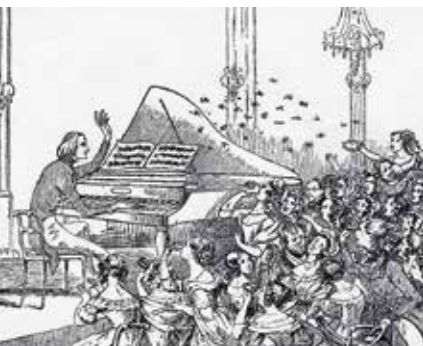
Devoted admirers: (top) ahead of his Proms debut in August 2024, fans gather in Kensington to chat about their love for Yunchan Lim; (above) superfan Jing Zhu

like a crazy idiot, but I have tried to see him perform everything in his repertoire. I haven’t quite succeeded,’ she laughs. ‘I keep reading he’s classical music’s answer to K-pop, which irritates me like mad. He’s not an answer to anything. But I sat next to a lady in Amsterdam who was a widow like me and after the performance she said, “Now that is music!”’

Jing Zhu, who plays violin, not the piano, really does her homework on Yunchan’s repertoire and posts lengthy reviews of his concerts on the Facebook site. Sometimes people on the Facebook group are offering tickets they can’t use. Some are clearly in love. And of course there’s gushing hero worship. ‘Show me a conductor or fellow musician who has done anything but fall in love with Yunchan Lim as a divinely gifted soloist AND a lovely, humble person,’ writes Alice Steinman.

‘He has become a sort of limerence object (no pun intended),’ chuckles Jing Zhu. ‘The way he moves, the way he pedals, the way he flicks his hair is what people get really obsessed about.’ ‘Do you fancy him?’ I ask. ‘Oh no,’ she says defiantly. ‘He’s far too young.’

Jing works as a banker and can afford to travel to see Yunchan’s concerts. ‘I book tickets for all his European performances and they always sell out, so if I can’t go I know I



Crazy for you: Lisztomania, 1840s

Extreme adoration Music's most ardent fans

Top-level musicians receiving cult-like adoration from fans is nothing new. In the 1830s, for instance, Niccolò Paganini got used to behaviour among his audiences that bordered on the obsessive, with the great violinist once reporting while on tour that, even among 'the cold Britons', he could scarcely walk down the street without being mobbed at every turn.

For Franz Liszt a decade-or-so later it was, if anything, even more extreme. Not content with simply swooning at his piano virtuosity on the stage, besotted female fans would compete to grab keepsakes such as strands of his hair, broken piano strings, discarded cigar butts and even dregs from his coffee cup, giving rise to the phenomenon known as 'Lisztomania'.

True devotion, however, can often mean not just worshipping one's own idol, but also seeking to destroy anyone who might be deemed a rival. In 1720s London, so bitter grew the hatred between followers of the mezzo Faustina Bordoni and soprano Francesca Cuzzoni that a fight broke out between them midway through a performance of Bononcini's *Astianatte*, causing it to be abandoned. Over two centuries later, fans of Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi were also known to boo and hiss the 'rival' singer on stage, though the two sopranos always remained respectful of each other.



can sell them to someone. I will also travel for Daniil Trifonov, but with Yunchan I feel FOMO [Fear of Missing Out]. So, she will have been at Wigmore Hall for Schubert and Scriabin on 29 May and will be at the Proms and at the Verbier Festival for his dates in July (26, 30 and 31).

Last year on the day of his Prom, Decca, aware of his fandom, posted on Instagram a piano in front of the Royal Albert Hall and tagged Yunchan... and people just turned up: students from the Royal College and fans who could speedily make it. Yunchan played, as did

'With Yunchan there are often moments in live performance that surpass his recordings'

several of the fans as well. 'It's not every day you see a superstar spontaneously performing outside the Albert Hall,' said Decca. 'It was to celebrate and give back something to the fans.'

Yunchan first performed in Verbier in 2024, and his solo concert last year was the first in the festival to sell out. 'I don't think there's been anybody I can remember who made such an overnight impact,' says Martin Engstroem, founder and director of the Verbier Festival, which has been going 32 years. 'Yunchan is a phenomenon. When you come to Verbier, you have ten to 15 of the greatest pianists of any given year. So it's tough to make an impression, but he immediately took his place.'

Yunchan's Rachmaninov Fourth last year was enhanced by a storm bringing heightened drama, as reported by Nicolas Poinot in *24 Heures*: 'The soloist smiles slightly and seems to integrate this new orchestral element into the narrative of his concerto, as if lightning, too, had been written by Rachmaninov. Proof that the moment was magical, the audience

refused to let Yunchan Lim leave and called him back numerous times. He granted an encore of breathtaking musicality before returning and bowing briefly three times in a row, a sign that he'd given his all.'

Verbier is a village of 3,000 people that attracts around 45,000 people to its concerts in July – many of them Korean, because it's possibly easier to see Yunchan in Verbier than in South Korea. One of the attractions is that artists are generally accessible and Engstroem says there are no locked doors. 'I try to be attentive to him and his needs, but I'm not closing all the doors because he's Yunchan Lim, so I discuss with him and his management when to be more careful.'

Jing Zhu, who was in Verbier last year and will be again this year, felt that because of his celebrity he was somehow protected: 'Verbier is a space where musicians and music lovers can talk to each other and interact. Trifonov was there and I talked to him walking up the hill. But with Yunchan it's impossible. I might look like one of his crazy Korean fans and his agents are quite protective of him. People are always taking photos. He can't roam around and enjoy Switzerland.'

Yoon Soojung lives in South Korea and initially wanted to be a concert pianist, but switched to business. 'Before Yunchan, I liked Martha Argerich, Radu Lupu and Mikhail Pletnev, but after hearing Yunchan I'm just listening to him. He gives around 15 concerts a year in Korea and I try to go to all of them. But in Korea they sell out in about ten seconds. So, I have membership to many halls, including the Wigmore. With Yunchan, there are often live moments that surpass his recordings.'

Yoon Soojung and Jing Zhu are on opposite sides of the world, but have become friends through his performances. 'Yunchan has opened a portal to the golden age of piano playing,' says Jing. 'And he has brought a whole world of fans together.'