

## Legendary pianist to lead orchestra

One of the music world's leading artists and thinkers, Leon Fleisher, joins the Springfield Symphony on Saturday as guest conductor and piano soloist, performing music by Mozart and Beethoven in the penultimate classical concert of the orchestra's 2006-'07 season.

Born in 1928, Fleisher began keyboard study at age 4 and gave his first public recital 4 years later. At age 9 he became a pupil of Artur Schnabel, the legendary Austrian pianist who traced his lineage from Beethoven through Czerny and his own teacher, Leschetizky, and who broke his own long-standing policy of not teaching children by accepting the youthful Fleisher.

At 16, Fleisher made his debut with the New York Philharmonic, playing the Brahms D minor Piano Concerto under the baton of Pierre Monteux. In 1952, he became the first American to win the Queen Elizabeth International Piano Competition in Belgium and rode a meteoric career path, appearing with orchestras and in recital on the world's most august concert stages.

In the early 1960s Fleisher was named the "pianistic find of the century," but by the middle of the 1964-65 season, his right hand ceased to function due to an ailment later diagnosed as repetitive stress syndrome, or repetitive stress injury, presumably exacerbated by long hours of practice.

Fleisher has described how his smallest finger began feeling weak, then stopped responding, curling inward. The fourth finger followed suit, and the fingers became numb. At 37, he stopped playing, "retired" from the stage, and dedicated his time to teaching at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, where he has held the Andrew W. Mellon Chair since 1959, and at the Tanglewood Music Center, where he served as artistic director from 1986 to 1997.

So renowned and admired did Fleisher's teaching become that his son Julian was quoted as saying, "someone once called him the Obi-Wan Kenobi of piano teachers." Fleisher formed the Theater Chamber Players at the Kennedy Center in 1967 and became music director of the Annapolis Symphony in 1970, quickly establishing his conducting credentials. He made his New York conducting debut at the 1970 Mostly Mozart Festival and was named associate conductor of the Baltimore Symphony in 1973.

Gradually he returned to the piano, performing the limited repertoire of piano music for left hand alone, at the center of which were works by Ravel, Prokofiev and Britten commissioned by the wealthy Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein (brother of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein), who lost his right arm during the First World War.

He never gave up the idea of returning to two-handed piano playing, exploring all manner of medical and psychiatric treatments, including surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome. In 1995, after a course of therapy known as rolling, which structurally changes connective tissues and restores flexibility and range of motion, Fleisher's right hand regained the strength and facility necessary to attempt two-handed repertoire. He played Mozart's Concerto in A Major, K. 414 (the concerto he will perform with the Springfield Symphony) with the Cleveland Orchestra with stunning success.

Acclaimed performances at Tanglewood, Carnegie Hall, the Ravinia Festival, etc. followed as Fleisher reveled in his return to two-handed pianistic life. He has returned to recording as well, releasing "Two Hands," a CD containing music by Bach, Scarlatti, Debussy and Chopin in 2004, and "The Journey," presenting works of Bach, Mozart, Stravinsky and Beethoven last year. Next month Deutsche Grammophon (Universal Music Classics Group) will release an all-Brahms album containing Fleisher's collaboration with the Emerson String Quartet in Brahms' Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34, a work that should leave no doubt of the pianistic poet's return to full two-handed potency.

Saturday's Mozart Concerto is sandwiched between two Beethoven favorites, the "Coriolan" Overture, Op. 62, and the Fifth Symphony, Op. 67.

The "Coriolan" Overture first appeared on a pair of 1807 concerts given in Vienna at the palace of Prince Lobkowitz, a generous patron of Beethoven to whom the composer dedicated his 3rd, 5th and 6th Symphonies, his 6 Op. 18 String Quartets, Triple Concerto, Op. 74 Quartet, and his song cycle "An die ferne Geliebte."

The stormy overture is assumed to paint a musical portrait of the Roman general Coriolanus, as described in the Viennese dramatist Heinrich Joseph von Collin's play "Coriolanus," premiered five years earlier.

The explosive nature of the overture is neatly balanced on the other side of the serene Mozart Concerto by what is perhaps the most gripping and best known evocation of tragedy and triumph in all of Western music, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. A landmark masterpiece of organic thematic unity and a work of hair-raising dramatic power, the C minor symphony continues to cast a two-century-long shadow over composers and concertgoers. It will be intriguing to hear what insight Fleisher, whose pianistic life exemplifies a musician's triumph over adversity, brings to this familiar symphonic

monument.

## About the Author

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