“Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy.”

— Ludwig van Beethoven

Leon Fleisher Memorial Service

Sunday, November 7, 2021 | 2:00 pm
Miriam A. Friedberg Concert Hall
The Peabody Institute, Baltimore, MD
THE JEWISH CHRONICLE SAYS THAT “THERE ARE FEWER
higher Jewish compliments to pay someone than to call them
a mensch.” So, I hereby proclaim Leon Fleisher as A Mensch of
the First Order.

I guess that’s why it’s the first word I thought of to describe
who Leon is to me. I say “is” rather than “was” because,
as long as I am around, Leon “is.” He’s one of those people
whose warmth, his voice, his smile and words make you slow
down, relax, and savor his presence. In music and in life, he
knew, consciously or instinctively, that silence, air between
words and between notes, allow the surrounding words and
notes to speak ever more vividly. The Schubert B-flat Sonata,
the Bach Chaconne, Schubert Sonatinas with Jaime Laredo,
Democratic and democratic issues all were the beneficiaries
of Leon “speak.”

I have a special affection for people who are enthusiasts and,
for me, Leon was one of those people in spades. The fact that
he got through the darkness that came to him early in life
and gave so much to music and to all of us into his nineties,
is vivid evidence of his courage and “enthusiast” credentials.

While I had the pleasure of being Leon’s manager for the last
twelve years of his life, we weren’t really artist and manager
but friends and fellow life enthusiasts. We were sons of
immigrants, beneficiaries of a respect if not love of, the arts,
humanities, and liberal social issues. There were many bonds
beyond music.

We met at Marlboro in 1960, my first summer there and a
memorable time on many fronts. Pablo Casals came for his
initial season and, there, I met a lovely lady, Martha Laredo,
who happened to have been a beloved babysitter for the
Fleisher family. Martha and I were married a year later.

It’s 60+ years later, but I recall some memorable non-music
Leon happenings — late-night poker games in the Concert Hall
green room; Leon holding an umbrella to shield the visiting
Queen Mother Elisabeth of Belgium, whose Competition he
and Jaime Laredo had won, from flying bread cubes thrown by
some inebriated young musicians at the Monday night fondue
dinner in the Dining Hall; and also his recording the Brahms
Liebeslieder Waltzes with Rudolf Serkin. When Deborah par-
ticipated in 1974, Leon visited and after dinner, we sat on the
porch of our little cottage and saw the most incredible harvest
moon that I have ever seen — a huge reddish sphere on the
horizon, slowly rising, turning orange, gradually becoming
smaller, until it finally became a small white glowing disc in the
dark sky. It was a magical experience that we all shared.

And then there were all the magical moments — musical
and personal — that Leon gave to Martha and me in the years
since then.

Thank you Leon for being a shining light in my life.

Frank Salomon
Symphony No. 2, Op. 27
Adagio

Peabody Symphony Orchestra
Leon Fleisher, conductor

Sergei Rachmaninoff
(1873–1943)

Sheep May Safely Graze
(Arranged by Egon Petri)

Leon Fleisher, piano

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685–1750)

Piano Concerto in C Major, K. 503
Allegretto

Leon Fleisher, piano
The Cleveland Orchestra
George Szell, conductor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756–1791)

Clair de lune

Leon Fleisher, piano

Claude Debussy
(1862–1918)

Deborah Fleisher
Leah Fleisher
Paula Fleisher
Julian Fleisher

Ed Polochick, speaker

Richard Goode, speaker

Fred Bronstein, speaker
Dean, The Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University
Piano Concerto for the Left Hand
Allegro-Tempo 1
Leon Fleisher, piano
The Baltimore Symphony Orchestra
Sergiu Comissiona, conductor

Maurice Ravel
(1875–1937)

Yury Shadrin, speaker

VIDEO TRIBUTES
Daniel Barenboim
Yefim Bronfman
Peter Oundjian
Danny Kelley
Pam Frank
David Zinman
André Watts
Gary Graffman

Piano Concerto in E-Flat Major, Op. 73, “Emperor”
Adagio un poco mosso
Leon Fleisher, piano
The Cleveland Orchestra
George Szell, conductor

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770–1827)

String Quintet in C Major, D. 956 (1828)
Adagio
Jaime Laredo, violin
Soovin Kim, violin
Maria Lambros, viola
Michael Kannen, cello
Sharon Robinson, cello

Franz Schubert
(1797–1828)

Jonathan Biss, speaker

Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960, opus posthumous
Andante sostenuto
Leon Fleisher, piano

Franz Schubert

The family is grateful for your presence today to honor the life of their deeply loved Leon Fleisher. After they have left the hall they will be pleased to greet you in the courtyard, weather permitting. Please continue to wear your mask outside so that everyone is protected.
Nocturne in D-Flat Major, No. 2, Op. 27
Leon Fleisher, piano

Liebeslieder Waltzes, Op. 52a for piano four hands (selections)
Leon Fleisher and Katherine Jacobson Fleisher, piano

Graceful Ghost Rag
(arranged for four hands by William Grossman)
Leon Fleisher and Katherine Jacobson Fleisher, piano

The Leon Fleisher Scholarship Fund will provide funding for the education of pianists, in honor of the musical wisdom with which Leon Fleisher graced Peabody for sixty-one years.

Donations can be made at secure.jhu.edu/form/leonfleisher.
LEON FLEISHER WAS WIDELY CONSIDERED TO be one of the greatest pianists of the twentieth century and a titanic figure in the field of music. His eloquence and insights into music were unmatched and unsurpassed. Students would emerge from sessions inspired to a level they considered life-changing. Through his poetic yet utterly precise language, Mr. Fleisher would connect music to another dimension and realm that was both “sublime and ennobling.” Through it all, he sought the truth of the music itself and was insistent on the need for one’s intentions to be exacting, avoiding any form of compromise in achieving one’s goals.

As a pianist, his playing was often called “Apollonian.” It was towering, magisterial, transcendent, exhilarating, pure, and illuminated the very purpose and nature of each work.

As a person, Mr. Fleisher was truly a humanist — someone who helped others in a large number of ways outside of the musical realm. He and his wife Kathy were highly active in addressing inequity in their home city of Baltimore and in addressing social issues. He had an enormous heart and never disparaged others.

Peter Simon

MAESTRO FLEISHER WAS THE MOST WONDERFUL artist, the most extraordinary human being of the world. For Dominique and many of his students including myself, he was Zeus, the Cosmic power itself! The nobility of his soul and his charisma marked my life for always. And his spirit will continue to live through and inspire us.

Akiko and Dominique Weber

THROUGH THE YEARS AS THE BSO STRUGGLED for economic parity, Leon was the force of conscience who repeatedly came forward to conduct the orchestra in times when the players were on strike or locked out. Each time, it was not only his incomparable musicianship that characterized the event, but also his eloquence, compassion, and civility. And those are but some of the qualities that people will remember him by. Of course we will all cherish how gloriously he played. But it was his singular generosity and humanity, along with his elegant performances, that will long remain and, especially in these bizarre and troubling times, continue to inspire us.

Stephen Fisher
WHEN I MET LEON FLEISHER IN JUNE 2016, I HAD arrived at a turning point in my life. His words, always carefully chosen and deliberately spoken, struck me like a thunderbolt. He was guiding me on the opening theme of the slow movement of Beethoven’s Archduke Trio. You should be as late as possible, he said, without being too late — waiting on the long notes, passing through the smaller notes. His incomparable rhythmical insight, structural understanding, and keen ear transformed the hymn-like solo into a poignant and private prayer. He taught me to listen, not to be expressive for the sake of being expressive. I remember looking around the room thinking, is anyone else aware of this master, of the incredible teaching taking place?

The next four years studying with Mr. Fleisher entailed too many life-changing experiences to recount individually. Each lesson, each interaction, shaped and affected me. Each ear-opening revelation led to listening to music in ways I had never understood before. Among the many hours we spent together in Room 413, I will never forget his playing of Chopin’s D-flat Nocturne. As with every piece Mr. Fleisher played, the rendition was utterly inevitable and his sound inimitable, a combination of beauty, integrity, tenderness, and generosity. Even in the last months, when lessons took place online through the inadequacy of technological devices, his sound and character remained unmistakable.

One of my favorite images was of the recitative section in Bach’s Chromatic Fantasia: a prophet standing in the middle of the desert, giving Biblical lessons to thousands of followers. To study with Mr. Fleisher (especially so much of the German repertoire, where one contemplates our place in the cosmos) was to study music that was greater than could ever be played. That perhaps was the most profound gift I could have received from him.

I could not be more grateful for his time, words, wisdom, advice, and honesty. Our meeting could not have come at a more pivotal and meaningful time in my life. He showed me all that I was lacking, and as a result, helped me to grow tremendously and rapidly as a pianist, musician, and person. My motivation is always to continue this growth, to constantly evolve to be the best version of myself.

For your complete dedication to music, for changing my life so meaningfully, and for teaching me so generously and powerfully: these words will never suffice. I can only say, thank you so much, Mr. Fleisher.

Rachel Kudo

ABOVE: Leon Fleisher and Katherine Jacobson Fleisher with Sasha, Tiger, and Kismet.
I REMEMBER WALKING DOWN 57TH STREET, Manhattan, with Leon Fleisher. The occasion was his 2007 workshop on Beethoven’s Sonatas, which I was privileged to participate in before becoming his student. I told him how utterly in awe I was of his latest recording, Brahms with the Emerson Quartet, and he responded in a funny way: “What do you like about it?” I felt taken aback and I remember nervously fumbling and stuttering through an attempt to give a coherent answer. It was a simple question, albeit, in his presence, an intimidating one for me. In the midst of my floundering, he chimed in to give me a piece of advice, loosely on the heels of our piano lesson earlier that day: “It’s very important to learn how to say precisely what you mean to say.”

It was hard enough for me already then, trying to succinctly describe my feelings about his Brahms on a New York sidewalk. Well, here I am now, attempting to articulate the entire impression of his being and its profound impact on my life, in only a few sentences.

I’ll start by taking a cue from him. It wasn’t so much that Leon Fleisher said precisely what he meant to say, which he did, of course, time and time again. The remarkable thing was how he said those things. Studying with him was like hearing the wisdom of Marcus Aurelius, day after day, but delivered by Marlon Brando. He knew when to speak each word just like he knew exactly when to play each note. Even if he started class by describing a Law & Order episode he watched on TV the previous night, you stopped in your tracks.

And it was simply impossible to not listen to him when he started playing the piano. Leon reacted to sound with every fiber of his being, and it was such a deep thing to witness his relationship to it. It seemed like sound took more time to resonate through his body, his life experiences, his wisdom, the depth of his being, which is perhaps why he found more space between two notes than anyone else. It was the most profound gift in the world to perceive that space in his presence, and those deeply vivid memories are the most treasured possessions of my mind’s eye and ear. They feel like maps to deeper layers of existence, into what I might naively call truth, and they guide me every day of my life.

So, Maestro...

(...long, Fleisherian pause...)

...I’ll now humbly give up on my attempt to say anything more because, frankly, words aren’t precise enough to describe my gratitude for knowing you.

Adam Golka
I once asked Leon how it felt to play Liszt’s A Major Concerto at age 10. After the characteristic pause, as he savored the process of summoning the precise words, he finally answered, with a boyish grin, “like a knight on a white horse.” That tender cartoon of the ‘boy hero’ was one that informed and colored my image of Fleisher throughout our 50-year relationship, first as my teacher, later as a friend and colleague.

When he was still a boy, Leon’s teacher, Artur Schnabel, was asked by a critic, skeptical of so-called prodigies, to speculate on the young pianist’s future. Schnabel answered that what set Leon apart from other gifted young musicians was that he was not afraid to be wrong. That fearlessness came from a deep source that stayed with him throughout his life. Thirty years later, when he spoke openly of his dystonia and his hiatus from the stage, no other major performers had come forward. On the contrary they went to great lengths to keep their injuries and disabilities top secret from their managers and the public. However painful it might have been for Leon, he was totally candid and unguarded, thereby opening the floodgates for younger performers to deal with physical issues in a healthier, more rational way. Leon had to summon that courage once again when he chose to perform with two hands, never knowing with certainty that he would be able to control his hands that day or not. Certainly there were concerts which were for him a disappointment, but they were the price he paid for many more unforgettable performances.

His artistry remains for musicians a benchmark of what art can do. For his fortitude in the face of daunting challenges, he remains my personal hero. For most of my life the expression ‘to cast a giant shadow’ has been nothing more than hyperbole, but I believe for all of us who were blessed to have briefly shared the planet with Leon Fleisher, we can agree that we were all warmed by the immense radiance of his presence and that, even now, we can take comfort in that shadow. He blessed us all.

Julian Martin

A few years ago, Leon came backstage to congratulate Simone Dinnerstein and Louis Langrée on their performance. After Leon left, Dinnerstein and Langrée were both in awe: “Leon Fleisher came to see us!” They acted like two giddy teenagers who had met their rockstar idol.

What an honor to have been in the orchestra with Leon at the piano or on the podium and every conversation with him was an education.

Ray Kreuger
IN 1987 MY LATE HUSBAND GEORGE PERLE WAS invited to be composer-in-residence at the Tanglewood Music Center where Leon had become the Director. Leon and I had lived in different cities for many years and now, serendipitously, if only for six weeks, we were to be neighbors. Our children, who had played together as toddlers in New York City, were able to renew their friendship at Tanglewood where they were all frequent visitors, and we had the joy of getting to know Kathy who had become Leon’s wife. In the following years, George’s frequent teaching stints at the TMC resulted in our spending entire summers there.

These were wonderful summers. Tanglewood was still under the wise stewardship of Dan Gustin, and the ebullient Richard Ortner administered the Tanglewood Music Center. The season was enlivened by the comings and goings of remarkable composers and performers. Hans Werner Henze and his partner Fausto were among the many memorable visitors.

Presiding over all was Leon, whose gravity and deep seriousness, leavened by a mischievous and ironic wit, set the tone and the spirit of the place. His concern for the musical development of the students in his care was evident to all who had the good fortune to be there. And, of course, there was the splendor of his performances. Those rich years with Leon as the head of the TMC ended with a fatal rupture in 1997. His departure left Tanglewood bereft. There was no longer his revered presence, his great musical authority to inspire the students. The Tanglewood Music Center, with all it still had to offer had lost its luster, while Leon with his playing, teaching, and conducting continued to carry the torch for music throughout an admiring world which mourns him now.

Shirley Perle

THAT LEON WAS AN INSPIRATION AND MENTOR to us groups us with the hundreds, if not thousands, of musicians who were blessed by his personality, his music, and his words. It is that large legion of musicians who play differently because of what they learned from him, and keep those ideas close to their hearts as they make musical decisions for themselves. Leon seemed to have a key for the door to every composer’s inner sanctum, and we had the feeling that he, more than virtually any other, had spent hours in there with them, talking, joking, eating, drinking, and becoming a close friend. Leon made us too feel closer to the giants of our art: he seemed to have far fewer degrees of separation from them than all others.

David Finkel and Wu Han
HIS GIFT TO THE DYSTONIA COMMUNITY, sharing his story and his struggle, touched many thousands of dystonia patients around the world. Virtually every patient who came to me with musicians’ dystonia knows of Leon’s story, and the example he set of resilience and of perseverance is a great inspiration to them. For the larger community of dystonia patients around the world, Leon was a beacon of hope for them. As Parkinson patients look to Michael J. Fox, dystonia patients looked to Leon.

Steven J. Frucht, MD

I SPENT SIX YEARS STUDYING UNDER THIS spellbinding man, and, as you can imagine, the many hours in his studio, as well as the stimulating experiences I collected over time, left a deep impression on me. There was a glowing radiance about him when he spoke and made music. His ideas emanated beams of light and cast a spell upon me. Each lesson felt as though I was witnessing an awakening. I looked forward to the next class with Mr. Fleisher, as one does, waiting for sunrise.

Mr. Fleisher used to say that “there are forces out there, and if you keep yourself open to them and if you go along with them, there are wondrous surprises.” He spoke of “forces” connected to musical tension and made comparisons with the laws of physics. When he attempted to reveal the mysterious forces of a given musical phrase, his symbolic notation resembled the trajectory of a kite lifting toward some destination in time.

I am constantly amazed at how Leon Fleisher’s influence still acts on me and how he will always be a part of my journey. I am a better person and a better musician for my years spent at his side. I will always be thankful and remember him with love and enduring gratitude.

Enrico Elisi

MR. FLEISHER ALWAYS ENCOURAGED US TO TRY all musical possibilities when approaching a piece of music, without being afraid to make the wrong choices in our quest to find answers. He constantly reminded us that this was the only way to come to some kind of musical truth. As time passes, his words are ever more meaningful to me; his values forever expanding and reflected in my own music making.

Leon Fleisher became my life mentor.

Tian Lu
WHEN I THINK OF TIMES SPENT WITH MY OPA, I am reminded of excitement, trying new things, traveling to beautiful places, and being surrounded by family — and always food. While there was usually physical distance between us, I always felt connected to him through his music. I would play his Two Hands record over and over again on rides to school, late nights of studying in college, and always trying to listen closely to him humming along to the music because it made me feel as if I was in the room with him. His presence was very meaningful and I could instantly feel his love and support whenever he was around, particularly because of his ability to really listen. I am constantly reminded of his side eye, smirks, and chuckles during those special moments where we could connect one-on-one. He brought our blended family together and I will miss our reunions filled with laughter, music — and of course food.

Lena Compton

IT’S TOO DIFFICULT FOR ME TO PUT INTO A FEW words how I’m feeling and the impact you’ve had on me and literally everyone who knew you. It was my dream to study with you, and till today I still can’t believe it came true. I feel tremendously honored to have been one of your last students, and I’ll forever relive and cherish every single life advice, musical wisdom, and memory, including being asked to fetch your favorite concoction of ice cream after meals together. All I can say for now is thank you, from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for everything. Rest in Peace, dearest teacher.

Chelsea Wang

HAVING LEON (OR OPA, AS I CALL HIM) AS A grandfather was such a blessing. I learned so much from him and was very lucky to grow up with him around, whether it was in his house in Baltimore cracking jokes while hanging out with the cats, or accompanying him to Vermont for serene summers at the Marlboro Music Festival. I miss him dearly and seeing the love from his many communities over the past year has been incredible. I’m grateful that I can hold onto these memories and celebrate his life with our family. I love you, Opa.

Harry Bernholz

WHEN I THINK OF TIMES SPENT WITH MY OPA, I am reminded of excitement, trying new things, traveling to beautiful places, and being surrounded by family — and always food. While there was usually physical distance between us, I always felt connected to him through his music. I would play his Two Hands record over and over again on rides to school, late nights of studying in college, and always trying to listen closely to him humming along to the music because it made me feel as if I was in the room with him. His presence was very meaningful and I could instantly feel his love and support whenever he was around, particularly because of his ability to really listen. I am constantly reminded of his side eye, smirks, and chuckles during those special moments where we could connect one-on-one. He brought our blended family together and I will miss our reunions filled with laughter, music — and of course food.

Lena Compton

I CANNOT IMAGINE A SINGLE PERSON WHOSE presence beyond life makes itself so deeply manifest in so many lives, including mine, in so many ways. His musical and personal and ethical influence will remain strongly with me, and through me my students and colleagues (and son, also) for the rest of my life.

Daniel Shapiro

ABOVE: The Fleisher family, Aspen Music Festival
HAVING STUDIED WITH MR. FLEISHER HAS BEEN the single greatest thing in my musical life. I will feel grateful, humbled, and privileged for the rest of my life. Through him it was that I became able to love music in a conscious way, and the word transcendence became graspable. This passing leaves me with a vast inner emptiness that seems to continuously widen every day. He was shining his light from Baltimore into the world, into countless souls that are now connected in common grief. I find comfort in thinking that this light continues to shine, and that he was only relocated. Now, there is an even stronger responsibility for his students, to hold up his values and ideals, to keep his achievements and his spirit alive. And we will do it with the utmost conviction, honored and blessed to be able to.

Moritz Winkelmann

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I HEARD LEON PLAY A recital, in Washington, DC, at the Pan American Union. On the program was the Schubert B-flat Sonata. It was an unforgettable performance. Several years later, I heard Arthur Rubinstein speak about Schubert and this work in particular. He felt that Schubert was the only composer whose music took us beyond this world into the next.

Ann Schein

COMING TO STUDY WITH LEON IN SEPTEMBER 1969 (52 years ago!) felt, to me, like finding an oasis in the desert. From the first lesson (Mozart Concerto in C, K. 503), I felt I was in the presence of a musical scientist — not in the clinical sense, of course, but as one endowed with a kind of X-ray vision, able to penetrate to the most elemental aspects of the music. Tempo, rhythm, phrasing, counterpoint, style, expression — all understood and communicated with visionary clarity, transcendent imagination, humor, and humanity.

In transmitting the Schnabel tradition, with a recorded legacy that is unsurpassed to this day, in showing heroism in the face of adversity, Leon has touched and inspired many generations of young musicians, serving as a guiding light to musical truth, selflessness, and integrity. I consider it my life-long honor, good fortune, and privilege to have found in Leon Fleisher a mentor, a Sherpa, and a friend.

Peter Takács
“What we have once enjoyed we can never lose...
All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

Helen Keller