

LEON FLEISHER

Guest Artist



Photo by Chris Hartlove

“You can’t see music as it passes through the air. You can’t grasp it and hold on to it. You can’t smell it. You can’t taste it. But it has a most powerful effect on most people. And that is a wondrous thing to contemplate.”

As a recipient of the Kennedy Center Honors in 2007, pianist Leon Fleisher was recognized as a “consummate musician whose career is a testament to the life-affirming power of art.”

The child prodigy began to study the piano at the age of four and by the age of nine, the legendary Artur Schnabel invited him to be his student, first in Lake Como, Italy, and then in New York, where he nurtured and inspired the young Mr. Fleisher for the next ten years as he evolved into one of the great music masters of our time. Leon Fleisher made his debut with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Pierre Monteux, when he was sixteen years old. Maître Monteux called him “the pianistic find of the century.”

Mr. Fleisher went on to international renown, becoming the first American to win the prestigious Queen Elisabeth of Belgium Competition in Brussels in 1952. He subsequently enjoyed a prolific recording career, most notably with George Szell and The Cleveland Orchestra, recordings recognized as among the great collaborations in the concerto repertoire. In 1965, before a scheduled tour of Russia with The Cleveland Orchestra, Leon Fleisher began to suffer symptoms of a debilitating condition of his right hand, later diagnosed as focal dystonia, a neurological condition that causes the fingers to curl into the palm of the hand.

After a period of great despair, Mr. Fleisher channeled his creativity in new directions, mastering the piano repertoire for left hand and initiating a career in conducting. He renewed his dedication to teaching at Peabody, where he has been the inspiration to hundreds of students since 1959. Leon Fleisher holds the Andrew W. Mellon Chair at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University. As a teacher, he has carried on a tradition that descends directly from Beethoven himself, handed down generationally through Carl Czerny, Theodor Leschetizky, Artur Schnabel, and Leon Fleisher himself.

In the mid-90s, with the combined therapies of Botox injections and Rolfing, he regained sufficient use of his right hand, leading to an extraordinary career renaissance. In 2003, Mr. Fleisher joined forces with his wife, pianist Katherine Jacobson, to form the Fleisher-Jacobson Piano Duo, giving concerts world-wide and recording for Sony Classical. Leon Fleisher released the album "Two Hands" in 2004, which went on to hold a Top 5 Billboard Chart position and was hailed by critics as one of the best recordings of the year. "Two Hands" is also the title of the Oscar nominated 17-minute documentary film about his amazing life story. In 2013, Sony Classical issued a 23-CD box set of his entire recorded output, and in 2014, Mr. Fleisher released his first solo CD in a decade, the Grammy nominated "All The Things You Are," which reached No. 1 on the classical charts.

In 2006, in Paris, Leon Fleisher received the honor of Commander in the Order of Arts and Letters by the Minister of Culture of the French government.

Mr. Fleisher continues with an international schedule of performances, orchestral guest conducting and master classes. In recent seasons, he has conducted leading orchestras in the U.S., Canada, China, and Japan; appeared as concerto soloist with orchestras including the Baltimore and Cincinnati Symphonies; performed as recitalist worldwide; and given his memorable master classes at festivals, conservatories, and universities around the country. In celebration of his 90th year, he appeared in Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal as soloist with the Toronto Symphony and Peter Oundjian and at the Gilmore Festival. In 2018-2019 he continues the celebration with recitals at Carnegie Hall, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, as well as at the Ravinia and Tanglewood Festivals in Summer, 2018.