



Leon Fleisher headlines Toronto Symphony Orchestra's Mozart@256 Festival

CONCERT REVIEW | By Daniel Frasca | January 15, 2012 | [LINK](#)

The Toronto Symphony Orchestra kicked off their new year with the Mozart@256 Festival. Thursday night's concert warmly welcomed guest conductor and pianist Leon Fleisher, as well as pianists Stewart Goodyear and Katherine Jacobson Fleisher. **Leon Fleisher, at 83 years of age, continues to wow audiences around the world as a conductor, soloist, recitalist, chamber musician and master class mentor. Leon's wife Katherine made her TSO début in this concert in Mozart's F major concerto for three pianos. She is an active soloist, duo pianist, and chamber musician.** Canadian pianist Stewart Goodyear, the soloist for the evening's other Mozart concerto, studied under Leon Fleisher while attending the Curtis Institute. Since making his début with the TSO in 1990, he has become an accomplished concerto soloist, chamber musician, and composer.

The evening commenced with **the energetic and brisk** sounds of Mozart's Symphony no. 1 in E flat, K16. Composed in 1764, this was one of Mozart's earlier works, written at the age of just nine. It was composed in London during a tour of Europe, and was influenced by the classical great Johann Christian Bach. The TSO set a **joyous mood** for the evening with crisp scalar runs and well-defined, boastful themes. The second movement was subtle and, although quite simple, **executed with a colorful emotion and tone that one could easily identify as Mozart's.** The lively third movement was **joyous, vivacious, and high-spirited.** The TSO layered the melody and accompaniment with meticulousness and balance.

The years 1785-86 are noted as highly creative and successful for Mozart, bringing forth compositions such as the Piano Concertos nos. 22-24, the Singspiel The Impresario, and his masterpiece The Marriage of Figaro. **The orchestral introduction of Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 23 in A, K488 was masterfully executed by Leon Fleisher in a statement-like manner.** Stewart Goodyear, playing the piano part, entered with much rubato, which added a distinctive feel to a commonly performed composition. **Upon the orchestra's re-entry, there was a feeling of unity between soloist, orchestra and conductor.** The second movement evoked a free, liberal mood, the performance enhancing the essence and beauty of Mozart's writing. Goodyear astonished Roy Thomson Hall with enthusiasm and immense technical precision in the concluding movement.

Leon Fleisher, Katherine Jacobson Fleisher and Stewart Goodyear assembled in a unique format to perform Mozart's Concerto in F for three pianos, K242. This piece predominantly featured

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the pianists with very little orchestral accompaniment, as the three pianists often accompanied themselves. **The clarity and precision were excellent throughout the performance, with Leon conducting while he played. The call-and-response dialogue between soloists was crisp and defined. This was a pleasure to experience and the three performers combined wonderfully and seamlessly.**

The concert was enterprisingly programmed to allow Fleisher to conduct both Mozart's first and last symphonies. The Symphony no. 41 in C, K551 'Jupiter' contains an endless amount of imagination. **In the first movement Fleisher embarked on an extravagant journey of stimulating ascending lines and animated melodies.** The second movement was light with a lovely dynamic contrast. The Menuetto countered this with an elaborate, almost waltz-like feel. **The audience was readily engaged in the passion displayed by both Fleisher and the TSO.** The final movement displays influences from the past, eventually incorporating five themes into remarkable fugal counterpoint. Here, the TSO kept the audience actively working to distinguish the melodies amidst a rich sound, concluding with a dramatic ritardando.

Musical Toronto

Concert: Conductor and pianist Leon Fleisher in constant search for altered level of human awareness

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The most remarkable thing about meeting Leon Fleisher in person is his absolute stillness.

Sitting down for an interview with the 83-year-old American pianist, conductor and teacher after his first rehearsal with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra in advance of Wednesday's opening concert in the TSO's Mozart@256 festival, the conductor's studio at Roy Thomson Hall lacks the usual star buzz.

Most conductors or soloists — and Fleisher is both, in this instance — emanate a sort of electrical charge that energizes whatever space they occupy. Fleisher, on the other hand, is an oasis of calm. His words come slowly, deliberately, sometimes with eyes closed.

“It's okay, the first rehearsal is over, and I think it went well,” he says. “What I do is not so much leading the band as giving ideas and a direction to go in.”

Fleisher explains how he prefers to lead from the piano bench rather than from a podium. “Great orchestra playing is like chamber music played on a much larger scale.” For him, the secret to a great symphonic performance is the same as for chamber music: everyone involved needs to listen intently to each other.

The secret to making this happen is zeroing on how an orchestra keeps time, coaxing each section to switch from keeping strict time to a state where everyone is following a conductor's instructions for larger, narrative rhythmic flow. “This is very dangerous work with an orchestra,” says Fleisher. “What matters most to them is their ability to play together, and there is no way one can jeopardize that.”

Keeping everything on an even keel during a rehearsal amounts to being able to pinpoint problems with great accuracy, and then resolve them as quickly as possible. “It's a question of diagnosis and prescription,” Fleisher explains. “Otherwise, you lose respect instantly. I call it Music Care, instead of Obama Care,” he chuckles.

Is there a special knack to achieving this? I ask. Yes, answers Fleisher, giving me a stern look, “you have to know the score.”

Making the transition from the soloist's perch to holding the baton is not an easy one, Fleisher allows: “To convince them (the orchestra) of the validity of your concept is always the greatest challenge. If you can induce them to follow your vision of what the music is about, you can have the most satisfying moments of a lifetime.”

Fleisher describes these moments as “being in the zone.” He smiles when I ask if these moments are more frequent in youth or maturity. “They're more frequent now,” he answers. “It gets easier with time.”

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There's another type of zone that Fleisher addresses during our chat, a heightened sense of awareness that, he believes, propelled the great masters such as Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Schubert et al to write such beautiful music. It's a level of consciousness he believes we are all capable of attaining, but are stymied by the constant of interruption of daily modern life — from having to look both ways before crossing a street to being interrupted by phone calls, emails and, he adds with a grimace, “this thing called Twitter.”

The master describes how he was giving classes at his teacher Arthur Schnabel's house on Lake Como in Italy one summer many years ago.

“I was sitting on the edge of the lake, looking at that view, of the Italian Alps in the background, with some of my students. I was thinking that nothing in the world could be more beautiful, when one of my students said, ‘Aloha.’” He stops to smile again, before explaining that this was a new acronym for Altered Level of Human Awareness.

If a concert goes well, it will impart a little bit of Aloha to the audience as well as everyone on stage.

On Wednesday and Thursday, Fleisher conducts Mozart's final, glorious “Jupiter” Symphony — No. 41 in C Major, K. 551. On the shorter, earlier Wednesday programme, he also leads the orchestra in a performance of Mozart's Concerto in F Major for Three Pianos, K. 242, a light, three-movement piece where Fleisher plays the easy third piano part, next to his wife, Katherine Jacobson Fleisher on Piano II, and Canadian powerhouse Stewart Goodyear on Piano I.

On Thursday, the programme expands with Mozart's first symphony, K. 16, written when he was 8 or 9, as well as the A Major Piano Concerto No. 23, K. 488.

For all the details on the Mozart@256 festival, [click here](#).

Both Fleisher's wife and Goodyear are former students. He is a Toronto fixture, a regular visitor with the TSO since 1955 and a welcome, three-time-a-year master class presenter at the Royal Conservatory of Music's Glenn Gould Professional School. He says he's been giving classes there since the 1970s, and allows that Conservatory CEO Peter Simon is another one of his legion of former pupils.

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