

Leon Fleisher Brings Out True Musicianship at Koerner Hall

By L.H. Tiffany Hsieh



There was a moment during Maurice Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* on Nov. 20 when members of the Royal Conservatory Orchestra watched in wonder the piano man on centre stage.

With his glasses off, his back to the audience, Leon Fleisher, 81, immersed himself in a wash of sound as large as a tsunami; his low hum was audible throughout the cadenza, his left hand worked itself into a blur up and down the keyboard.

As the sound gradually diminished, Fleisher lifted his right hand over the piano — his left hand playing all the same — and masterfully gave cue to the orchestra in a different time signature.

In a program that featured him both as a soloist and conductor, the American pianist who had to abandon the standard piano repertoire at the

height of his career at the age of 37, when he lost the use of his right hand due to a neurological movement disorder, **dazzled the audience in the sold-out Koerner Hall with his tenacity to do just one thing — make music.**

A familiar face in Toronto's classical music community, especially at the Royal Conservatory of Music where he has given master classes since the inception of the Glenn Gould School in 1997, Fleisher has, thanks to a combination of Botox injections and Rolfing, enjoyed a successful comeback to two-hand playing in the last several years.

In Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, he proved once again that a true musician does not need 10 fingers to make beautiful music on a piano.

Commissioned by Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm in the First World War, the single-movement concerto displays Ravel's versatility as a composer to write full colour and texture for one hand.

Fleisher's fast finger work throughout the piece's harmonic, melodic, percussive, and glissando passages made the dark and mighty piece sound as if it were played with two hands. Conducting the orchestra from the piano bench, he was sensitive to Ravel's brilliant orchestration and brought out layers of nuances from various sections of the orchestra. Here, **the musicians must have been infected with Fleisher's deep devotion to music**, because they sounded like a professional orchestra rather than one that is in training.

The Royal Conservatory Orchestra, comprised of some of the country's brightest young musicians, produced for the most part an expansive and expressive sound. In

Rachmaninoff's epic *Symphony No. 2*, the musicians were shamelessly giving to Fleisher's lyrical and romantic treatment of the big tune. As a whole, there was excessive drama and passion, but that is never overdone in this more-is-more work.

The orchestra suffered, though, in their ability to play together consistently. This deficiency showed especially in the opening work, Beethoven's *Coriolan Overture*, a rhythmically theatrical work that requires dead-on synchronization and chemistry from each player.

But with an orchestra that is so eager to give and please — and give and please they did — one can easily forgive the rest.