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## A Great Pianist and Teacher, Locating the Keys to Perseverance

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There's a lot of bad news out there about classical music -- slumping ticket sales in many cities, shrinking output from the major record companies, the so-called "graying" of the audience. Every now and then we get a bit of luck, however, and one of the chief joys of the last dozen years has been the gradual return to public performance of one of the greatest and most searching of all pianists, Leon Fleisher.

For music lovers, this is news on the level with [Muhammad Ali](#) staging a sudden comeback with his punch still intact, or J.D. Salinger publishing a new novel, or [Bobby Fischer](#) slashing his way through a chessboard once again. Listeners who grew up on Fleisher's magnificent, long-ago recordings and never dreamed they would be able to hear the pianist play without impediment have been rewarded with a series of fresh albums and concert appearances. And tonight, Fleisher will cap his recent triumphs with the richly deserved [Kennedy Center](#) Honors.

"I was amazed, moved and utterly delighted when they told me," the 79-year-old Fleisher said recently in his [Baltimore](#) home. He had just presented a seminar in [Beethoven](#) sonatas at [Carnegie Hall](#), played concerts in [Europe](#) and been honored by the World Piano Pedagogy Conference in [Las Vegas](#). But he sounded happy to be back in the city where he has lived and taught since 1959. "Baltimore is on *such* an up these days," he said. "It's as full of vitality and energy as it has ever been in the nearly half-century I've been here."

Back when Fleisher started teaching at the Peabody Conservatory all those years ago, his future seemed assured. He had everything -- a technique that knew no difficulties, a bejeweled tone, meticulous musical taste and a sure intellectual and expressive grasp of whatever he played. Famous since his mid-teens -- Fleisher made his formal debut in 1944 at Carnegie Hall with the [New York Philharmonic](#) -- he had won the prestigious Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition of [Belgium](#) in 1952, after which he played in the leading concert halls throughout the world and was generally accepted as one of the world's best young pianists.

And then, in 1965, at the age of 37, damaged and miserable, he canceled all engagements and withdrew from performing.

"Basically, my right hand turned to stone," Fleisher recalled. "In the early 1960s I was practicing seven or eight hours a day, and when I noticed some weakness in my right arm, I only practiced harder. It was all wrong. I never allowed my muscles to decontract, and as a result I essentially ruined my arm."

Fleisher famously refers to those long-ago practice sessions as "pumping ivory" and notes that a lot of young pianists from his generation were similarly damaged. "We all wanted to be so strong, and it was all a terrible mistake. We all wanted to be like Vladimir Horowitz, to have that killer technique. And we harmed ourselves enormously in the process."

His condition would eventually be diagnosed as dystonia, a neurological movement disorder. But that explanation would come many years later; at the time, all that was clear to Fleisher was the fact that he could suddenly, mysteriously, no longer play. "We knew nothing about repetitive stress syndrome in those days. I saw doctors, I saw hypnotists, and nothing worked. There was no explanation, no answer at all. I was miserable."

After a long period of despondency, Fleisher realized that, as he put it, he loved music more than he loved the piano, and he found other ways to serve the art -- teaching, making occasional appearances as a guest conductor and playing works for the left hand alone (of which there are a surprising number, due to some distinguished commissions from a wealthy



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pianist who lost an arm in World War I). From 1986 to 1997, he served as the artistic director of the Tanglewood Music Center in [Massachusetts](#).

Still, Fleisher never quite gave up hope that he might be able to play the piano again with both hands, and occasional attempts were made. In the mid-1990s, a technique called Rolfing -- a form of tissue manipulation discovered in 1940 by a biochemist named Ida Rolf -- helped him make a partial recovery. He compared it to a "massage in slow motion."

"The therapist searches out points of contraction in the muscle and then applies pressure in such a way as to stretch out the fibers," Fleisher said. "If the muscle is healthy, there should be no pain; if there is pain, something is wrong. When you resist, you tighten up, but once you give in, the pain will likely resolve itself and disappear."

Rolfing allowed Fleisher a way of working around his disability. He did not conquer so much as adapt, using his right shoulder more than is customary, leaning deeply into the keyboard and raising his wrist unusually high, but he made appearances at Carnegie Hall and elsewhere in some limited two-hand material.

But in 2001, there was a major breakthrough, when Fleisher underwent treatment with botulinum toxin, or [Botox](#), at the [National Institutes of Health](#). This radical therapy, in tandem with the Rolfing, finally allowed the tension in his muscles to relax and permitted his fingers, long crabbed, to stretch out to their full length again.

Since then, he has made some beautiful recordings, the first of which was called, appropriately, "Two Hands." In the future is a [Mozart](#) concerto and an album of what Fleisher refers to as "guilty pleasures -- encore pieces by Albeniz, Granados and other composers."

In the meantime, Fleisher continues to teach at Peabody. "It is a fabulous way to learn," he said. "One teaches almost for selfish reasons, to clarify things in your own mind and verbalize them for the students."

This Fleisher does brilliantly. At a Peabody master class in April 2004, he led a gifted student through a performance of the Sonata in F Minor, Op. 5, by [Johannes Brahms](#). First, he permitted the young man to play the first movement straight through without comment, to appreciative applause from the small but intensely focused audience.

"Beautiful," Fleisher said, after a moment of silence. "How do you feel about your interpretation at this point? Are there still things that leave you dissatisfied?"

Fleisher then launched into an explication of the sonata so acute and thoughtful that it called to mind what the literary biographer W. Jackson Bate said of the late letters of John Keats -- that there was not a single idea about poetry in any of them that could not be tested and found true.

"When you get right down to it, there are three very simple choices that musicians have to make," Fleisher said. "We have to decide how to attack the note, how to support the note and how to stop the note. It's tougher for pianists in some ways because we don't have to support the note physically the way other instruments do. If you stop moving the bow on a violin or blowing into a wind instrument, the music stops right there. With the piano, the sound can be sustained by a pedal. But that doesn't let us off the hook.

"This is piano music, but it has a profound sense of the orchestra," Fleisher said. "Think about how you would orchestrate this -- the bass line might be played by the strings or maybe by the brass -- and then play it as if you were an orchestra, all by yourself."

The pianist then began the piece again, and what had been powerful but somewhat one-dimensional suddenly blossomed into a full-fledged and deeply moving performance. "Yes!" Fleisher shouted. "That's a *statement*."

Fleisher believes that today's pianists are more proficient than ever, even without "pumping ivory." "The technical capacities we expect from musicians as a matter of course is more and more amazing. It's a little like the four-minute mile was for runners in my day -- an impossible goal. But now there are four-minute miles being run all the time. We've transcended that limit.

"The same thing is true of pianism. There are a lot of 'four-minute mile' pianists out there now. But the real artists are as rare as they ever were."

Fleisher should know. He's one of them.

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