

## Lessons Learned -- a memoir in honor of Leon Fleisher

My lessons from Leon Fleisher were as far from traditional as one could get. I am writing this short memoir because I hope that I can pass some of what I have learned on to young pianists everywhere. With time, perspectives change, but with death come final bars. No revisions.

I met Mr. Fleisher through my own teacher, Aube Tzerko, who also studied with Schnabel and was his assistant. Mr. Tzerko was about twenty years older than Leon and the story goes that Aube gave Leon some lessons. When Aube arrived in Europe his last name was Kotzer. Schnabel immediately told Aube that he could not live in any German speaking country with that kind of name. Kotzer was too close to kotzen which means someone who vomits, so presto, Schnabel, who was great with words, turned the syllables around and gave Aube a new name: Tzerko!

When Leon visited Los Angeles (early 1960's), he always needed a place to practice, and Tzerko, as we called him, nominated our house. Nice house, nice Steinway, no one to disturb him, and I was in school! I am sure that Mr. Fleisher did not know I came home early. I was the first kid to get a so-called 4-4 schedule. This allowed me to get out of school two hours early, so that I could both practice piano and go to dance class. One of my biographical secrets is my love for dance, the fact that my early ambitions were to be a dancer, and the terrific training I received from Carmelita Maracci and others.

I vividly remember hearing the piano as I got close to the house. Brahms D minor 1st movement. I came in quietly like a kitten, and slowly peeked around the corner into the living room. Fleisher was extremely involved singing loudly and sweating profusely. He was pumped up; his practice was so energetic, like 500%! I ventured down the one shallow step into the living room and curled myself around the winged-back armchair where I had a great view. Unless Fleisher would actually be looking to see if someone was there, I was pretty invisible.

I knew the Concerto quite well because I had already played it. I was so struck by the amazing similarity of Fleisher's and Tzerko's ideas, ideas that *must* have come from Schnabel himself. Witnessing the gigantic influence and legacy of Schnabel firsthand, I was ever so proud.

To this day, I can hear every note, every bar of Fleisher's practicing. He went over all the octave and sixths passages in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement, again and again and the coda too, over and over, never slow, always in tempo or above tempo, and super strong. He seemed to have little regard for his body. He was so stiff and off balance.

I retreated into the dining room to take a break. Finally, he went on to the second movement, a beautiful glorious playthrough, so heavenly, so personal, so moving and so big in scope! I was back in my spot in the living room, totally in awe, enthralled and transported.

By the time he started the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement a few hours had passed. No break. He launched into the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement full-force-plus in sound and emotion. Wow! I remember in particular the unrelenting repetition of the coda, so incredibly tense and intense, without the slightest let-up in tempo, passion or power. He was in some kind of wild stupor. Each time it was faster, louder and

more insistent. His body was so contorted. By now the piano was screamingly out of tune; the treble strings were about to break. I remember my feelings exactly: fright. My thoughts were: “What is he trying to do? What could he be hearing?” and lastly, “My God, he is either going to break the piano or break himself.” By the time he finished I was in my room with the door closed.

Previously, I had met and played for him at Tzerko’s house. My future was all set. The plan was for me to study with him at Peabody even though this was a few years away. Case closed. Raised as a prodigy, this kind of decision making was to be expected. Fleisher was so much larger than life and had such an enormous personality. For me he was “*the great*” American pianist of all time with the most colossal talent. In his presence I wanted to disappear.

His practicing was over the top for me. The bottom line is that I never showed up to study with him, and not only did I not show up, I never wrote to say that I was not coming. All I remember are harsh criticisms about how I had disappointed “everyone”. Instead, in a roundabout way, I arrived at Indiana University. It was perfect for me to be in György Sebök’s class and in his care, embraced by the aura of his immense genius, which still plays a profound role in my daily life. My love of chamber music blossomed with Janos Starker and Josef Gingold. I loved lessons with Menahem Pressler. I was in heaven.

Time passes more quickly the older one gets. When I found out that Fleisher was coming to Eastman (2014) to teach and play, my first instinct was to keep hiding since I had already been hiding for about fifty years! As his visit approached, I was able to lessen my fear. I said to myself, “What bad could possibly happen in conversation between two alte kakers (two old folks)?” I wanted to apologize.

With some trepidation I wrote Fleisher a handwritten note the day of his arrival in Rochester and personally delivered it to his hotel. The concierge promised me he would receive it. It was a very simple note saying that I would love to spend a few minutes together. That evening I received a call from him: “Let’s go out after the master class”. “Fine” I said, “I’ll come backstage.”

He recognized me from afar – and I was flabbergasted. We went to a nearby hangout with a few other faculty. It was a small group and my colleagues could tell we had “business”. First words out of his mouth were: “So, why didn’t you show up?” I had forgotten about what a sweet and kind-natured man he was, how super bright and quick his mind was, and that we shared so much Yiddish, and a whole bunch of other similar perspectives. Conversation between us was easy.

I told him the truth pretty unfiltered: “I had been in the room during your practicing all those times, and that, from my dancer’s perspective and experience, I thought you were going to kill your body with abuse. I felt sure you were headed for a massive injury.” He was stunned and silent. “You saw me in a quasi-manic state?” I said “yes, in a frenzy with a kind of unconsciousness.”

We talked about the fact that neither Schnabel nor Tzerko addressed efficiency or ease in playing and that I knew I was already in trouble physically. I told him I didn’t write to him because I didn’t know what to say. Every fiber of my being at that time told me I needed to work on my

body, to find a way to feel physically comfortable at the piano. My vision was to learn how to dance or float at the piano without pain or strain. I chose Sebök and Starker as mentors; they devoted their lives to working out these kinds of issues.

Over the years I had watched Fleisher closely and was able see and hear for myself that he remained stuck and unable to rehabilitate his right hand well enough to resume a normal concert career. I was sure he had reached out for all kinds of help. We spent quite some time during his visit discussing various aspects of his injury in relation to various other Schnabel disciples. His questions were very focused and personal and therefore ought to remain confidential.

After a long silence, he looked at me and said, “Rebecca, why didn’t you tell me what you saw?” It was my turn to be stunned. A sharp pain pierced my heart. After a long pause I said, “I just couldn’t see you paying any attention to what a teenager would say. You were so out of touch with your body.”

“But if you had only tried, he said, “You were a trained dancer. Maybe I would have heard you!” I had no words. I still have no words. What if I had spoken up?

When he performed the Brahms Quintet during that visit, I was able to confirm that his body language and way of playing had not changed; it was a total déjà vu experience.

My lessons from the great Leon Fleisher continue now from the other side. I am so very sorry I did not have the courage to speak to this giant of a man earlier in his life. The irony is it was he who really set me on my life’s path exploring the infinite relationship between physical motion and human emotion at my beloved instrument, the piano.

Rebecca Penneys  
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