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## THE CRITICS

### MUSICAL EVENTS

#### THE SONATA SEMINAR

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Leon Fleisher's exuberant exploration of Schubert.

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"There are so few notes," the pianist Leon Fleisher said, "but so many implications." The setting was a recent master class at Carnegie Hall. Fleisher, the master in question, was leading four young musicians through the mystical landscapes of the late sonatas of Schubert. He was speaking about the Andante movement of Schubert's B-Flat-Major Sonata, but he might as well have been describing Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," or Brahms's Intermezzos, or any other music in which a smattering of notes conveys a world of feeling. "There are so few notes, but the implications go back billions of years," Fleisher went on. "You have to be like the Hubble Space Telescope, which sees stars as old as the universe. The stars are dead, but their light is reaching us just now."

Fleisher is seventy-five, but he looks an eternal, grizzled, professorial sixty. He is one of the incorruptible legends of his profession; some time ago, students took to calling him the "Obi-Wan Kenobi of the piano." Working with him on the Schubert sonata was Inon Barnatan, a twenty-five-year-old Israeli pianist with a clean-cut look. Barnatan smiled nervously and looked at the keyboard. How do you make notes sound like ten-billion-year-old stars? He tried again. He had been playing with exceptional stylishness; he obtained a hypnotic tone from the piano. But in his hands the Andante felt a little too finished, too smooth; the main theme didn't sing out enough against the accompaniment, which consists only of C-sharps slowly rising by octaves.

Fleisher changed his tack. "O.K., try playing these C-sharps as if you were a conductor giving a beat. You are making a grid underneath the music. It has to stay *exactly* the same. The melody can sway this way and that, it can come in a little before the beat or a little after it, but the C-sharps must be unbending."

Barnatan resumed playing. The C-sharps chimed in clockwork patterns. Suddenly, the melodic line was freer, more sensual; its shape was framed by the grid. "Good," Fleisher said. Barnatan added a few accents of passion and began swaying from side to side. "Not so good," Fleisher said. "When you get louder, the character changes. Your plaintive, yearning creature, your nymph or naiad, is turning into some horrible, saliva-dripping alien."

The two dozen or so people who were attending the class laughed at the image—an alien clinging to the Hubble telescope. The rapt mood was broken. Barnatan's shoulders drooped, but he kept smiling, and tried once more. This time, Fleisher was satisfied. "Lovely," he said. The next day, Barnatan did it again, and Fleisher said nothing for a minute or two. "I'm enormously moved by your growth," he said. "Now all you have to do is play it a hundred and fifty times."

Playing the same sonata hundreds of times in public is something that Leon Fleisher never got to do. In the nineteen-fifties, he was hailed, along with William Kapell, as one of the most brilliant

American pianists of his generation; he made near-definitive recordings of the Brahms concertos with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra. Then, in 1964, while preparing for a tour of the Soviet Union, he found that the fourth and fifth fingers of his right hand were involuntarily curling up. He gritted his teeth and practiced harder. Within a few months, his right hand was almost useless. He was suffering, although he did not know it at the time, from a neurological condition known as dystonia, which is a kind of short circuit between the fingers and the brain. Only in the past few years, after receiving Botox injections in his hand, which relaxed his muscles, has he been able to play again at full strength.

Fleisher recently told his life story at a presentation sponsored by the Dystonia Medical Research Foundation, in New York. Not one to sentimentalize, he began by saying, "It's a pretty good soap opera." Nonetheless, he confessed that the loss of his right hand had nearly broken his spirit. What saved him was the realization that he loved music more than he loved the piano. He took up pieces written for the left hand alone, he learned conducting, and, above all, he taught. His reputation as a sage of the piano crystallized at this time. By his own account, he could no longer push his students off the bench in order to demonstrate how a passage should go; instead, he had to use words. He had the advantage of having studied in the nineteen-forties with Artur Schnabel, who was perhaps the sagest pianist of the century—a poet of the instrument, a scholar of the repertory, a master of language. Many of Fleisher's ideas about articulating rhythm, melody, and harmony come straight from his memories of Schnabel's classes, which took place in a famously over-upholstered apartment on Central Park West.

Listening to Fleisher talk about music is delightfully dizzying. The metaphors come in an endless flow. Play like a cat, he might say, but with sheathed claws. Play it like a Bavarian milkmaid, not like Britney Spears. Fingers shouldn't be hammers, they should be dolphin flippers. This chord change could be from a Marlene Dietrich song; croak over it. Don't slow down like a bad Italian tenor. More Talmudic. Play it as if with the tip of a bow. Make it motionless, prayerful: a penitent lifts his eyes toward Heaven. Clothe the bass line in summer linen, not heavy wool. Syncopations should land like counterpunches: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." (Schnabel was the Muhammad Ali of pianists, Fleisher says: he didn't have a big sound, but he always knocked out the orchestra.)

Fleisher's references were sometimes arcane, as when he alluded to the "Toonerville Trolley" comic strip, which stopped running in 1955, or when he asked one student playing a meditative passage for "a chakra point below the navel." Even his most fanciful images, however, had a precise application. Yujia Wang, a dynamic player who was tackling Schubert's C-Minor Sonata, was too brutal in her attack. The piece has violence in it, Fleisher told her, but not of a modern kind. "Back in 1828, when this was written, people fought duels, and before they took out their swords they looked each other in the eye," he said. "Now our killing is long-distance. Bombs travel hundreds of miles. They explode. So what? I want a different intensity." Fleisher grabbed Wang's arm and showed how she was "dive-bombing" the keyboard from above. He asked for a more lateral motion. "Play forward and upward," he said, echoing a favorite phrase of Schnabel's. The transformation was instantaneous: in place of chords that crunch on impact, Wang got sounds that sang out after the initial zing.

The real Obi-Wan moments arrived when Fleisher told the pianists to "beat time" with their bodies, even when they were holding a chord, or to "want expression without trying to get it." And he had unnerving news for those who were listening in on the class, eagerly recording his every word: "I'm flattered that you're sitting here with pencils and scores, but if you were playing I might say the opposite."

Fleisher's demands can be gruelling, but the results in this case were dramatic. On March 31st, in a collective concert at Carnegie's Weill Hall, four pianists—Barnatan, Wang, Hiroko Sasaki, and Mana Tokuno—demonstrated what they had learned from some fifty hours of instruction. Wang's performance was the most immediately gripping. She had total command of the sometimes sadistically difficult C-Minor Sonata, and she conveyed a kind of joy in the challenge of it. Early on in the piece, she had trouble negotiating simpler, more songful passages, and by the end she still had not fully grasped the slow movement: the central, heart-stopping modulation from A minor to A-flat major went by as if nothing special had happened. But the second theme of the first movement, which she had initially pronounced "plain," glowed with life.

Barnatan was the most naturally poetic of the four pianists; he has an instinctive understanding of Schubert's fragile, deep world. Sometimes he got lost in the sounds he was creating; in the first movement, he kept losing track of the pulse and speeding up when he got loud. But in the Andante he made sounds that might have won the approval of Schnabel himself. Several times, he let his eyes drift penitentially toward the rafters, so that if you had been looking straight at him you would have seen only the whites of his eyes. ♦