

World Famous Pianist Leon Fleisher Returns to Perform with ASO



World-renown pianist and conductor Leon Fleisher will perform with the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra at their season-opener concert, Monumental Music.

After nearly a decade, one of the world's greatest pianists returns to play with the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra (ASO). Leon Fleisher will help kick off the eight-concert season by playing Beethoven's Concerto No. 5, in which the piano is pitted against the orchestra and eventually wins. Directly following will be Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10, which reflects on freedom from Stalin's oppression—a fitting theme in light of the guest pianist's lifelong struggle.

Fleisher served as the ASO's music director from 1970 to 1982, bringing to the group notoriety and experience from an extensive career as a piano soloist. A child prodigy, he began playing piano at age 4 and by age 16 he was performing with the New York Philharmonic. At the time he was recognized as one of the best pianists in the world.

"We were totally surprised and

pleased that someone of his caliber was coming to our small town orchestra," says Philip Richebourg, president of the ASO from 1965 to 1974. "He was extremely capable [from the beginning]. It all fit together very well. . . . He raised the caliber in his 11 years there."

The ASO was a candle in a dark time for Fleisher. His career was abruptly halted during the 1964–65 season, when his right hand began to constrict uncontrollably.

"I had come down with something called 'focal dystonia,' which prevented me from playing with my right hand," says Fleisher. The disease, which was first incorrectly diagnosed as an extreme repetitive stress disorder, eventually rendered his right hand nearly immobile.

Fleisher was introduced to the ASO and conducting purely by chance. "One of my students at that time, Michael

Campbell, was a cellist in the Annapolis Symphony Orchestra," he says. "They had just lost their conductor. My student had been engaged as piano soloist and asked me to conduct the concert. I had always been fascinated with that activity so I said 'Sure!' And that was the beginning. They offered me the job after that and I spent 12 years there as music director."

"[The ASO] was really a disparate group," says Fleisher, "local Annapolitans who had jobs during the day but who knew an instrument, loved music, and wanted to play together. It was a combination group and we wound up playing better than we knew how somehow. It was wonderful."

After leaving the ASO, Fleisher traveled the world teaching music and conducting orchestras from China to South America. He always remembered Annapolis, however, as the place where he learned to conduct. "Annapolis holds a very special place not only in the direction and development of my music career, but in my heart as well," he says.

It wasn't until 1995 that his condi-



The Annapolis Symphony Orchestra will perform eight concerts this season.

tion was properly diagnosed and treated. Fleisher says "they found various ways of relieving the symptoms" which have enabled him to play a limited two-handed repertoire and release a number of albums. It has been almost a decade since he last played with the ASO and he looks forward to returning.

Monumental Music takes place on September 15 and 16 at 8 p.m. in Maryland Hall. For more information and tickets, visit www.annapolissymphony.org, or call (410) 263-0907.

—Conal Darcy