

Mind and hands over musical matters

By Josef Woodard
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

IN CONCERT

When renowned pianist/conductor Leon Fleisher performs with violinist Jaime Laredo at the Montecito Country Club today, the main focus will naturally be on the musical substance produced. Both players have gained reputable stature in the classical field over the course of decades, and will be performing a Schubert program destined for a later appearance at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall.



Leon Fleisher

But sonic menu aside, it is forgivable, in this case, to train special attention on the pianist's right hand. This very hand was missing in action from classical music for nearly 40 years, as the musician struggled with the restrictive effects of focal dystonia. A mixture of Roling and Botox helped him recover the use of his hand, and his acclaimed 2004 album "Two Hands" was a powerful statement of artistic rebirth.

If Fleisher is weary of discussing his saga, he didn't show it during a

JAIME LAREDO AND LEON FLEISHER

When: 5:30 and 7:30 p.m. Friday
Where: Montecito Country Club, 920 Summit Road in Montecito
Cost: \$50, general admission, \$19 for UCSB students
Tickets: 893-3535 or www.artsandlectures.ucsb.edu

recent phone interview from his hotel in Paris, where he was in the midst of a conducting and performing stint. He's a gracious interviewee, but is also quick to clarify that this is no Rip Van Winkle-like tale, and he has maintained a long, rich life of music during his long absence.

Addressing the story everyone wants to know about, Fleisher says, with a soft laugh, "it is kind of wild, isn't it? The whole hiatus was by the by, was filled with the learning and playing of left hand repertoire, filled with conducting and teaching, filled with my activity as a musician. It just continued, but in slightly different directions.

"In '95, when both Roling and the application of Botox to focal

dystonia came on the scene, the result was virtually immediate. All during that period of 30 to 35 years, I was testing my right hand every day, positioning it this way and that way, at this or that angle. So I was pretty much in shape. It just took a couple of days for the botox to kick in and I was playing again."

Born in San Francisco in 1928, Fleisher studied with Artur Schnabel and debuted with the New York Philharmonic at age 16. His career as a pianist was on a fast track, until blindsided by focal dystonia, a ravaging muscle-neurological condition.

Fleisher's return to the world's stage was cemented by "Two Hands." Apart from the renaissance theme of the recording, the calming music itself — including music of Bach, Chopin, Schubert and Debussy — had a relevance to the spirit, and the unrest, in the world at the time.

"There was great satisfaction in doing it," he says of the recording, "but there was also a sense of trying to establish a kind of tranquility, a kind of serenity with a lot of the music on that record. I felt somehow that everything about us was in such turmoil that the works I chose, to a large extent, tried to counter that sense."

Fleisher's amazing story shows no sign of blending into the woodwork soon. Shortly after his Santa Barbara appearance — a UCSB Arts & Lectures-sponsored event — Fleisher will be attending the Academy Awards. A documentary on the Fleisher story is nominated for an Oscar. This will be his first visit to the Oscar ceremony, "and most likely my last," he adds, with a laugh.

Among the positive results of his time spent with only a left hand to work with was the commissioning of many new pieces — concertos, solos pieces and chamber works — for the specialized field of left-hand piano music. It's a field made famous through the efforts of left-handed industrialist/pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost use of his right hand in World War I and went on to commission special pieces composed by Ravel, Hindemith, Prokofiev, Britten and Richard Strauss.

Asked whether he senses a renewed emotional intensity in his piano playing now that he's back fully in action, Fleisher agrees, but with qualifications.

"I'm not so sure that is exclusively the result of 35 years in the desert, as it were," he says. "I would hope that some of that is the result of maturing and aging. But certainly, a lot of the excitement that I get in performance is recompense for the dry spell. During that whole period, though, I was continuing the whole time to function as a musician, which was the thing most vital to me."



COURTESY PHOTO

Saturday's Solutions for Dreamers Festival at Arlington Theatre will bring together musicians and artists, including singer/guitarist Matthew McAvene, above, to draw awareness to the Heal the Ocean Foundation.

Wishing upon a big dream for Heal the Ocean

By Tyler Blue
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

IN CONCERT

Solutions for Dreamers started out six years ago as a slogan for a Web development company. Along the way it has come to represent a music festival embodying the optimistic spirit of a new generation.

In 2004, partners Jacob Tell and Sean Campos launched Oniric Records and soon put together a promotional compilation disc. Along with Hillary Hauser, co-founder and executive director of Heal the Ocean, they formulated an ambitious vision for a charity event in conjunction with a second CD release. Simple Shoes hopped on board as a sponsor and off they went.

On Saturday, the Arlington Theatre will bring together several local musicians and artists to shine awareness on Heal the Ocean. When he's not rehearsing in the studio with his new band, singer/guitarist Matthew McAvene puts on the hat of a master puppeteer.

Trained by his brother Paul and other prodigies of the Jim Henson style, McAvene is known for transforming his concerts into eye-popping displays. For this performance, he constructed 16 elaborate fish, each four feet in length, to be paraded through the Arlington. Dancing puppets also will grace the stage during his 45-minute set.

The troubadour explained, "There's this childlike spark that comes off of people when they experience music and puppets together. It puts people in a magical space."

The Solutions for Dreamers

SOLUTIONS FOR DREAMERS

When: 1 p.m. booths open to public; 4:30 p.m. doors open Saturday
Where: Arlington Theatre, 1317 State St.
Cost: \$25 to \$55
Tickets: 963-4408 or www.solutionsfordreamersfestival.com

festival is an all-day affair with a promenade of booths offering goods from local artisans, henna tattoos, healthy food, live music and a gathering of environmental organizations.

Hauser refers to the event as a "kick in the head" in regard to its ability to stir up awareness and said she hoped it would "create a big noise."

Musicians performing include Michael Franti & Spearhead, Culver City Dub Collective, Dyson Sphere, McAvene and UCSB alums, Animal Liberation Orchestra.

Of the festival, ALO guitarist Dan Lebowitz said, "growing up in California, the ocean has been a thriving force in all our lives. To get people to rally behind a cause, it's got to become a personal thing."

Sphere will present his music as the soundtrack to a film to be shown during setbreak.

Tell said, "We have this incredible footage of these humpback whales from the Tongan Islands. I think seeing this is going to help people visualize why it's so important to preserve this nature."

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