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For immediate release:

Pianist Leon Fleisher to Perform at the Mondavi Center

January 30, 2008; Davis, California—Pianist **Leon Fleisher**'s comeback from a crippling disorder is among the music world's most remarkable stories. A child prodigy, Fleisher was renowned as one of the world's great pianists during the 1950s and 1960s, but at the height of his powers, lost the use of his right hand due to focal dystonia. Recently, new therapies have enabled him to recover, and his return performances have been greeted as near miracles by audiences and critics alike. Next month, Fleisher will perform works by **Bach** and **Schubert** in a special recital at the **Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts at UC Davis**.

The performance will begin at 8 pm on Friday, February 29, in the Mondavi Center's Jackson Hall on the UC Davis campus. Tickets are available from the Mondavi Center Ticket Office at 530.754.ARTS (2787) or online at MondaviArts.org. The event is presented as part of the Mondavi Center's **Raley's & Bel Air Concert Series**. There will be a free Pre-performance Lecture by piano instructor **Diane Phaff** in the AGR Room of the **Buehler Alumni and Visitors Center** adjacent to the Mondavi Center at 7 pm.

Leon Fleisher will also conduct a master class on **Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major** ("Emperor") on Saturday, March 1, at 10 am in Jackson Hall. The master class will feature Fleisher's comments and insights on the concerto, with performances by student piano soloists and the **UC Davis Symphony Orchestra**, under the direction of conductor **D. Kern Holoman** and conducting students **Jessica Bejarano** and **David Moschler**. The master class is open to the public, and attendance is free.

Born July 23, 1928, in San Francisco, Leon Fleisher began piano studies at the age of four—he would listen to his older brother's piano lessons, then play them note for note without any instruction—and his family soon realized he had a special gift. He gave his first recital at eight, and the following year began studies with the German pianist **Artur Schnabel**, one of the most acclaimed musicians of the twentieth century and a masterful interpreter of Beethoven and **Schubert**. (Fleisher has called Schnabel "an unbelievably good teacher" whose level of inspiration "was just staggering.")

At age 16, Fleisher made his debut with the **New York Philharmonic**, and quickly established himself as one of the finest pianists on the international concert stage. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, he performed with virtually every major orchestra and conductor to widespread acclaim. His recordings of the piano concertos of Beethoven and **Brahms** with legendary conductor **George Szell** and the **Cleveland Orchestra**

have, in the estimation of many critics, never been bested, and his recordings of various pieces by **Grieg**, **Schumann**, and **Rachmaninov** are all very highly regarded.

In 1964, while preparing for a tour of the Soviet Union with Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra, Fleisher's fingers began to curl uncontrollably. Ten months later, they had clenched into a fist, and the diagnosis was clear: Fleisher had focal dystonia, a neurological condition that causes involuntary muscle contractions, and his career as a concert pianist seemed to be over. He continued to perform the repertory for the left hand, and channeled his energies into conducting and teaching, but never gave up on the idea of a return to performing with both hands.

Fleisher explored a wide variety of treatments without success—everything from aromatherapy to hypnosis. Finally, in the mid-1990s, he found that a combination of massage therapy and Botox injections began to prove effective. The therapy did not “cure” him, but it did begin to ameliorate the symptoms enough so that he could return to two-handed playing. In 2004, Vanguard Records released *Two Hands*, his first two-handed recording in 40 years, to widespread acclaim. Many critics seemed to feel that Fleisher's years of suffering and contemplation had led him to deeply considered and profound interpretations that were truly something special.

“This verges on the unbelievable,” wrote the *Gramophone* reviewer. “Dexterity and dynamics are effortlessly controlled. . . technique is coupled to an imaginative intellect that portrays the language of each composer in deep terms.”

“The performances of works by Bach, Debussy, Scarlatti, Schubert, and Chopin could not be more elegant, insightful, and affecting,” wrote *The New York Times*.

Fleisher is also highly respected as a conductor and teacher. His reputation as a conductor was established when he founded the **Theatre Chamber Players** at the **Kennedy Center** in 1967, then became music director of the **Annapolis Symphony** in 1970, and associate conductor of the **Baltimore Symphony** in 1973. He has appeared as guest conductor with the orchestras of Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Montreal, and Detroit, among others. He also had a regular association with the **New Japan Philharmonic**, as well as with the **Chamber Orchestra of Europe** and the **Gustav Mahler Chamber Orchestra**.

Teaching has been a crucially important element in Leon Fleisher's life. As a pedagogue, he has held the Andrew W. Mellon Chair at the **Peabody Conservatory of Music** since 1959, and also serves on the faculties of the **Curtis Institute of Music** in Philadelphia and the **Royal Conservatory of Music** in Toronto. He also gives master classes at music festivals and concert halls all over the world.

Two Hands, a short documentary on Fleisher by **Nathaniel Kahn**, was nominated for an Academy Award in 2007. That year also saw the release of Fleisher's recording of the Brahms *Piano Quintet* with the **Emerson Quartet**, which was greeted by outstanding reviews. In 2005, Fleisher was honored by the French government with the rank of Commander in the French Order of Arts and Letters, and in December 2007, he received the Kennedy Center Honors Award.

“Leon Fleisher is one of the greatest interpreters of the great classic literature for the piano. His playing shows a maturity and insight few pianists can match,” said **Don Roth**, the Mondavi Center's executive director. “We look forward to what promises to be an outstanding recital of works by Bach and Schubert.”

What: Leon Fleisher
When: Friday, February 29 ▪ 8 pm
Where: Jackson Hall
Robert and Margrit Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts
University of California, Davis
Admission: \$49/\$45/\$35 Adults • \$24.50/\$22.50/\$17.50 Students & Children
Tickets/Info: 530.754.ARTS (2787)
866.754.ARTS (toll-free)
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