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Response Paper #4: Leon Fleisher

Summary:

In PBS NewsHour's interview of Leon Fleisher, Jeffrey Brown interviews the virtuoso on how he navigated life with a disability that had complicated his music career. The program's examination of Fleisher's life focuses on how the performer continues to emerge himself in the world of classical music despite the challenges that his focal dystonia, a neurological disorder that detached two of his fingers' muscles. It argues that his disability was an important aspect of his life that he needed to overcome in order to return to the industry of classical music.

The interview begins with footage of a young Leon Fleisher, using both his hands to play a quick and energetic song on the piano. Jeffrey Brown, the interviewer, narrates Fleisher's prodigal standing in the industry, and as he mentions Fleisher's acquired disability, the image of vibrant and young Fleisher begins to fade to black. This transition exemplifies a tone of ableism that is implemented throughout the entire interview. Brown labels Fleisher's disability, focal dystonia, as a "loss" (0:31), fueling a false perception that a disability is guaranteed to have a negative impact on an individual's life. Furthermore, the scene is transitioned by Brown narrating that the disability is a "tragedy turned into a kind of triumph" (0:40-0:42), thus continuing to support the ableist archetype that a successful person with disabilities is one that has transcended their physical abnormality, implying that it is the disability that restricts their success, and not the unaccommodating society that they are forced to navigate. There are also numerous examples where Brown uses words such as "successful" (7:34) and "comeback" (6:53)

to describe when Fleisher is able to use ten of his fingers to play piano, and implies that his success depends on whether he returned to perceived normalcy. Thus, the interview portrays Fleisher's experience as a musician through an ableist perspective, presenting his disability as an obstacle.

However, the program also displays the strict nature of the classical music industry and acknowledges the toxicity that these factors create. Fleisher shares how the relationship between the performer and the music is complicated because audiences tend to perceive the performer as the "star" (2:43) rather than the music. In the case of Leon Fleisher, he was celebrated immensely in the industry, but once he felt the effects of his disability, the industry would no longer welcome him with the same ease. "I don't know any music for eight fingers," (3:45-6) states Fleisher, and he elaborates that because of his disability, his classical music career was at risk, leading him to contemplate suicide. He was rescued from his thoughts of suicide from his community, such as his friends and his peers, and states that with those positive interactions he was able to perceive his role in the world of classical music was not in relation to the instrument, but with the music. This not only demonstrates how authoritarian classical music culture is, but also exemplifies how the lack of accommodation has immensely toxic effects for the participants of that community. The traditionalist notion of classical music is steeped deeply in its culture, and its begrudging attitude of evolving past their stringent culture leads to exclusion that borders on discrimination.

The PBS NewsHour interview, although occasionally imposing ableist notions, reveals how an artist's career in classical music is complicated and even jeopardized when they possess a disability. It raises issues of equity, accommodation, and how traditionalist structures can create detrimental consequences for individuals who don't fit its version of normalcy.

Response/Questions:

The culture of performing classical music is entrenched in traditional and absolutist values. The tradition immensely increases the difficulty that individuals with disabilities are able to be active in this industry. The PBS NewsHour's Interview raises issues of how traditionalism and an absolutist perception are detrimental to an evolving community.

Traditionalist structures create a harmful culture that excludes the possibility of diversity and inclusivity. This is exemplified in Fleisher's experience as a musical artist with disabilities, as he became limited to using one hand despite having eight fingers that could play, but because there was no "music for eight fingers" (3:45-6), his repertoire was limited. There is also a pattern of detriment that absolutist societies have created, cross-culturally, as is shown in Xu Dishan's "Spring Peach." Xu's short story tells of three displaced individuals in Chinese society during the 19th century. Throughout the story they struggle to find their place in society, and their displacement creates conflict. Yet they are able to find peace when they accept that their social arrangement does not need to fit into the binary positions that their government imposed on them. This displays how an absolutist structure can create harm, especially to the individuals who don't adhere to the society's standard of normalcy.

Furthermore, it was only till after Fleisher had received temporary treatments to his focal dystonia, that PBS NewsHour labeled him playing with ten fingers as a "true comeback" (6:52). Although Fleisher had played in concert halls with one hand before, the program illustrates him to be successful only when he returns to the sense of normalcy that the classical music society accepts. His other performances with one-hand do not adhere to the traditionalist structure of classical music, thus they become irrelevant in measuring his success. This imposed perspective of ableism becomes even more apparent as the interview continues. Jeffry Brown asks that had

Fleisher not have found treatments for his right hand, would he “feel like a failure” (7:37)? This is not only ableist, but also condescending, as it implies that a disability is an obstacle that needs to be overcome or a sickness that needs to be cured. Both of those are centuries-old archetypes, and they become most apparent in traditionalist structures, especially since those structures limit the ability for accommodation, diversity, and provide justification for discriminating against those who do not adhere to the perceived normative state.

One of the most vital aspects of the interview is when it displays how Fleisher’s disability lead him to contemplate suicide, and it was only due to close friends and students that he was aided into a mentally healthy state. This exemplifies the positive effect that communities can have on an individual if they consist of members who embrace the individual’s differences. This led to Fleisher realizing that his “relationship was with music more than with the instrument” (4:25-37). This also portrays the ways in which a traditionalist structure in classical music creates harm, the structure limits the focus on music, and instead increases its exclusivity with its lack of accommodating instruments.

It’s important to examine the detrimental effects of traditionalist and absolutist structures, especially the negative consequences they have on the individuals that are not part of what is considered the normative state. Traditionalist structures often have a hierarchical structure of power, in which individuals with disabilities are almost always at the bottom. This is prevalent as it played an immense role in Fleisher’s life, as the PBS NewsHour program shows how the industry that once deeply revered him made it difficult for him to succeed once he had his disability. Thus, in order for a society to evolve and create greater opportunities for the non normative, it needs to rid itself of its traditionalist structures and absolutist perspective.