

Music and the Art of Adopting Dogs

KATHERINE JACOBSON FLEISHER AND LEON FLEISHER,
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND



Chandler, a Foxhound mix

It is a beautiful sunny afternoon as I carefully drive up the winding road to visit Katherine Jacobson Fleisher and Leon Fleisher. As they greet me warmly with two of their dogs, Ranya and Chandler, I slowly take in the details of the large, sun-filled room. Two grand pianos face each other and, in turn, a comfortable seating arrangement faces them, as if waiting for a performance to begin. Scattered around the room are mementos of a life in music; photographs of Leonard Bernstein, a young Leon Fleisher at the piano, and placed discreetly on a bookshelf, the Kennedy Center Honor that Leon Fleisher was awarded in 2007. Leon Fleisher is a world-renowned pianist, conductor and teacher who has influenced generations of musicians. His wife, Katherine Jacobson Fleisher, is a classical pianist who has an international career as a soloist, duo pianist and chamber musician. Their extraordinary musical legacies are a matter of public record, but I am visiting to talk to them about a more private interest – Christine Merrill’s paintings, their love of dogs and especially their ongoing efforts on behalf of homeless dogs.

“Christine and I met trying to save a dog,” states Katherine. “I was walking to the post office when I noticed a dog on the street, alone and in distress. I tried to coax him into my car but he was too scared. At that moment, I noticed a lovely woman walking down the street headed for the post office with a package in her arms. I didn’t know her but she looked kind and intuitively I felt she was an animal lover. So I stopped and asked ‘When you’re finished at the post office, would you mind helping me get this frightened dog into the car? I’m trying to rescue him!’ Christine replied immediately, ‘Sure!’ She was out in a flash and with the compassionate communication she had with the dog, we managed to get him in the car.” Christine ended up going with Katherine to the animal hospital and they soon realized that they had a lot in common. They immediately became friends.

Katherine had dogs as a child – including a beloved Dachshund who lived to be fifteen – but it was only when she moved to Baltimore in 1976 that she adopted her first homeless animal, a shepherd/hound she named Kane. When Katherine and Leon married, Leon was initially hesitant about having a dog in the house, but he was soon won over. “Leon ended up being very close to Kane,” remembers Katherine, “and when Kane died we both wept very hard, but I think Leon was

Katherine Jacobson Fleisher and Leon Fleisher with Ranya and Chandler



even more broken up than I was. He was just so attached. Kane was also the beginning of my awareness of the plight of homeless animals in Baltimore. I became conscious of the need to help homeless animals. And then it just snowballed.”

Katherine and Leon currently have four dogs: Chandler, Ranya, Millie and Gussy, but only Chandler and Ranya were at home for my visit. Millie is a Rat Terrier and Ranya, a Border Collie mix, both adopted from the SPCA in Baltimore. Chandler, a big Foxhound mix and Gussy, a Red-Bone Hound, were rescues from Missouri and put up for adoption by Animal Rescue, Inc., in Maryland Line, Maryland. Although Katherine would not necessarily have chosen a dog as large as Chandler, “For me, it was the old story. I was supposed to be fostering Chandler, but I fell in love with him and ended up adopting him myself. He’s just great. And it became apparent that he was so even tempered and unflappable that he might work as a therapy dog.” He had to be tested by Pets on Wheels, and even with people pulling on his ears and tail, he did not react with aggression, but remained calm. Pets on Wheels was founded in 1982 by Dr. Frank Furstenburg and they now have weekly visitations by more than one thousand volunteer teams. Chandler is now a therapy dog, bringing unconditional love to people in nursing homes and assisted living communities.

The Fleishers have found loving homes for many rescued dogs over the years, but they have also raised awareness – and money – for animal shelters and a

Matching grand pianos face each other in the living room *Christine Merrill, Katherine Jacobson Fleisher with Tiger, Oil on canvas, 60 x 40 inches*



variety of rescue organizations. “In the recent past, we’ve presented benefit concert events in our home which have raised a sizable sum,” explains Leon. They have also gone further afield. In Hayward, Wisconsin, they did a benefit recital for the Northwoods Humane Society, whose animal shelter opened in 1996. Although the concert was free and they just asked for donations, they were able to raise over seven thousand dollars. They packed the auditorium and even had people sitting on the stage. “Katherine and I are now looking forward to performing a benefit concert for the Baltimore Animal Rescue Care Shelter (BARCS) at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in June of 2010,” states Leon.

Their next dog was Kismet, also known as Kissie, who used to come visit with Leon’s son, Julian. “That was when we realized that two could be cared for as easily as one, and three as two, and four as three,” Leon says, smiling. “I never quite knew what I’d find when I came home. But it was usually four-legged!” Kismet lived with the Fleishers until she was almost seventeen. Sasha, a purebred Belgian Sheepdog, and the other dog in Christine Merrill’s portrait, was also a rescue. “That was back in the ’80s,” explains Katherine, “and I was on my way down to Peabody to teach one Saturday morning, and I noticed this beautiful black dog sniffing around in a parking lot.” Katherine searched for an owner, but there was no one around, so she managed to get the dog in the car and take him to the vet where he was vaccinated. “We simply could not find his owner.” Katherine tried again and again to adopt him out, but either the people were not right or the dog for some reason would be returned. As Leon explains, “Katherine does not give her dogs out easily.” Sasha ended up staying with the Fleishers, although the transition was not an easy one. “I was preparing for an all Mozart recital and at that time Sasha was about a year old, almost a teenager in dog years with all the concomitant issues! I would tie his leather leash around one leg of the piano bench while I practiced so I could

Mementos of Leon Fleisher’s extraordinary career in music



Christine Merrill, Sasha and Kismet, Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

keep an eye on him. As I started to practice the sonata, he was right by my side but by the time I reached the recapitulation, Sasha had disappeared – he’d chewed through his leash and was enjoying a romp through the house! I think he chewed through three leashes in this way before I decided to board Sasha temporarily and focus on Mozart. Sasha later learned to love Mozart and was always hanging out around the piano when I practiced!”

Sasha eventually grew into adulthood and it was his portrait, along with Kismet’s, that Katherine commissioned Christine Merrill to paint in 1989. They are depicted by the goldfish pond, looking inquisitively down at a little goldfish that has swum to the surface. Christine has the goldfish blowing a small bubble, inside of which is a musical note – a subtle reference to the owners’ vocations. Christine also painted the full-length portrait of Katherine with her yellow Labrador Retriever that hangs in the music room, opposite the matching grand pianos. Leon and Katherine are great admirers of Christine’s work and her work ethic. “I would say that Christine is the hardest working artist that I know. She is highly disciplined and any really successful creator, be it a painter, musician or writer, needs enormous self discipline.”