

MEET A MUSICIAN

LEONID FINKELSHTEYN

Dedication Doubled

In the 1980s, double bassist and Leningrad-native Leonid Finkelshteyn — Lenny, for short — had no choice but to leave his job with the Symphony Orchestra of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He had been drafted into service in the former Soviet Union, assigned to the medical academy band: “It was either go, or go to prison,” he says.

“When I arrived, they said, ‘We heard that you are a bass player,’ and I proudly said, ‘Yes, I am,’” Lenny remembers. “I had won a national bass competition, I had a position with the philharmonic — I was feeling good about myself!” His supervisors, however, were more interested in Lenny’s ability to read bass clef. “They said, ‘Okay, you’ll play that,’” Lenny recalls. He followed their gaze to find a tuba waiting for him.

Though he was not thrilled about taking up another instrument in place of his beloved bass, Lenny approached it with diligence, as he approaches everything. When he asked what he might do to be granted leave for a night, he was jokingly told that all he needed to do was learn 30 marches by memory. Lenny, never afraid of a challenge, got to work practicing. He had mastered about 15 marches before the Major decided he’d heard enough tuba day-in and day-out, and permitted the leave.

Perseverance has defined Lenny his entire life. At age 13, he played the piano for a well-known bassist who immediately recognized his musical potential and insisted that he come study bass at a prep school connected with the Leningrad Conservatory. Lenny, “blown away by the beauty of the bass sound,” agreed. However, most people come to the bass after having played a different string instrument; as a pianist, he had some catching up to do.

“I was always an A student, so it was important to me not to lag behind,” he explains. “I would practice in the morning before school, and after school I would run to the concert hall to go to every performance I could find.”

Lenny caught up, to say the least: He entered the Leningrad Conservatory at age 18 and in his second year, a position opened with the Symphony Orchestra of the Leningrad Philharmonic. “People said, ‘You cannot do that — you’re too young!’ But I prepared and won the job,” he says. (After his year-and-a-half of military service, Lenny returned to that orchestra and soon became Principal Bass.)

But, also a dedicated big brother, Lenny did not want to see his younger sibling drafted to the military as he had been. The two moved



The NCS double bass section has remained unchanged since Lenny (center) joined in 1996.

together to the U.S., where Lenny spent several years freelancing in Minneapolis-St. Paul and Chicago before joining the North Carolina Symphony as Principal Bass in 1996; his brother is now Principal Cello of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. They occasionally have the opportunity to perform together — and over Thanksgiving weekend in Cincinnati, the brothers exchanged musical ideas about Lenny’s upcoming concerto performance with NCS.

The double bass concerto that Lenny will perform — written by composer and retired NCS bass trombonist Terry Mizesko — has been a long time in the making. “For years, I talked with Terry about writing a bass concerto, at first as a joke,” says Lenny. Eventually, the conversation turned more serious, and Lenny and Terry embarked on what became a collaborative project.


“The majority of bass concertos are written by bass players who really know the instrument,” Lenny explains. “Sometimes a melody can be very easy on the ears, but very hard on the bass — we have to overcome the size, so there are acrobatics involved! Terry and I worked together closely so that I could explain what was possible and what wasn’t.”

Similarly, the two have jointly developed ideas on musical phrasing. “It’s a very vocal piece,” Lenny says, mentioning that he can hear hints of popular Russian songs. “I’ll ask Terry to sing certain lines to me so that I can understand where he’s coming from and figure out how to make it happen.”

Giving a world premiere comes with a great sense of responsibility — even more so, considering it’s not every day that audiences have the chance to hear the bass as a solo instrument. Lenny predicts that people will be surprised by the instrument’s lyrical tone, pitch range, and velocity. (“Sometimes we go very high, and we can be pretty quick. You’ll hear that in Terry’s concerto,” he says.)

Life has been busy preparing for the premiere of what Lenny calls “a monumental work.” But then again, life is always busy for this hardworking bassist. Outside of rehearsals and performances with Symphony, Lenny teaches extensively and plays chamber music — often creating his own programs, since repertoire including the bass is not as common as repertoire for the other strings.

Lenny is also on a never-ending hunt for instruments. He always has an eye and ear out for basses for his students, and for years, he has scoured the country in search of a smaller bass to use specifically for his solo playing.

He hasn’t found the perfect one quite yet — but knowing Lenny, there is no doubt that his perseverance will pay off. 

Leonid Finkelshteyn is soloist in Terry Mizesko’s Concerto for Double Bass and Strings, February 1-3 in Southern Pines, Raleigh, and New Bern. For details and tickets, visit ncsymphony.org.



Lenny enjoys “every aspect of being a musician” — orchestral, chamber music, and solo playing.