

“You may the piano

Canadian pianist **Janina Fialkowska** was enjoying a hectic international career when doctors found a large tumour in her left arm. Two major operations later, she began a dogged fight to re-teach herself to play

words by **Nina Large** portrait by **Peter Schaaf**



A protégée of Arthur Rubenstein, Fialkowska was in demand by orchestras across North America and Europe when tragedy struck

There can be few things more terrifying for a professional musician than hearing the words ‘you may never play again’. It’s hard to imagine quite how awful it must be to see everything you’ve spent your life working towards perched so perilously close to the edge. Yet this is exactly what happened to Canadian pianist Janina Fialkowska at the discovery of a rare and chronic cancer in her left arm.

Yet Fialkowska never gave up hope. ‘I just ignored the fact that I might never play. I guess it was a defence mechanism. It was like a challenge which I had decided I would win.’ And indeed she really has: just two years later, proving the doctors wrong, she was back on the concert platform playing two-handed repertoire. Her busy international schedule for 2006 includes performances of the Grieg Piano Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London, Croydon and Northampton (4, 5 and 8 April respectively).

For nearly 30 years before that fateful diagnosis in 2002, Fialkowska’s career had been flying high.

She was a protégée of Arthur Rubenstein, who effectively launched her into the limelight after her prize-winning performance at his inaugural Master Piano Competition in Israel, in 1974. Indeed, such was his total belief in her talent that towards the end of Rubenstein’s own career, he would only accept invitations to play if they were backed up by a reciprocal engagement for Fialkowska. With over 50 concerts a year, she was in demand by orchestras all over North America and Europe. The news of her illness couldn’t have come as more of a shock.

But this was not a woman to be beaten. Just a week after her first six-hour operation in May 2002 (during which surgeons cut through a major nerve in order to remove a 12cm tumour and chunks of two separate muscles) she hauled out the Ravel *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* and put in an order for Prokofiev’s Fourth, which is also for the left hand. She then transcribed them for her right hand (which was unaffected by the cancer) and easily persuaded the orchestras engaged to work with her for the next season to change their programmes. The reviews were ecstatic.

Having triumphed thus far, Fialkowska underwent a second gruelling operation in January 2003. Since the cancer itself was so rare it required a pioneering operation that had never been performed before: the surgeons were to detach a muscle from her

never play again...

back, pull it up and reattach it under her left shoulder blade. It was her only hope for ever regaining the use of her left arm. This time there was to be no leaping back to the piano: for nearly five months Fialkowska was forbidden to try to move her arm, except under the supervision of her physiotherapist – she even had to sleep in a brace.

'I stopped listening to music – it was just too much for me'

These were tough times, even for one so doggedly positive. 'I stopped listening to music – it was just too much for me,' she remembers. 'One day I put on a disc of Solti conducting overtures with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and suddenly I lost it and cried and cried. This was my music – this was my passion. It was like looking into this desperate black hole.' Her husband Harry was an immeasurable support.

During her recovery, Fialkowska showed her mettle yet again, writing a book of memoirs about her life, particularly about her friendship with Rubinstein, and revamping her longstanding music outreach charity Piano Plus (previously Piano Six).

Finally the doctors said she could start trying to move her arm. With her new muscle in place, she found she could work at the keyboard for short bursts, and she set about the arduous and painstaking task of re-teaching her hand to play.

Progress was slow since she could only move her arm laterally, but through sheer steely will,

Fialkowska set about playing Baroque works since they require the use of only the central portion of the keyboard. Bit by bit she returned to much of her old repertory. Everything had to be entirely relearnt but Fialkowska chooses to look at the silver lining: 'There are some works I can't play because they require just too much movement, but it's a real luxury to wallow in fewer pieces. I am still seeing everything with fresh eyes, and getting a far deeper and better insight into old works as a result.'

In January 2004, Fialkowska made a triumphant and emotional two-handed return to the stage. She is now performing as many as 30 concerts a year, and last August she recorded a CD of chamber versions of the two Chopin piano concertos with the Chamber Players of Canada on the Atma label – another huge psychological victory for her.

The shadow of cancer lingers over her and Fialkowska has suffered two secondary cancers in her lungs (which were successfully stopped in their tracks). There remains a constant ache in her arm and her left elbow is glued to her side most of the time so that 'reaching up or eating elegantly' with her left hand is seriously impaired. But all the while she has also seized the chance to do other things with her life – walking in the Bavarian hills (where she makes her home with her husband), lapping up nights at the opera, exhibitions and museums. 'Life is far more tranquil now. I honestly believe I have never been this happy. I used to be so ambitious – now I don't need to be kept going. I'm just here, doing what I love. I think I have finally arrived.'

Fialkowska's ability to embrace such adversity is testament to her incredible grounding and to her strength of character. 'There was despair occasionally and a lot of fear. But mostly there was hope. A lot of hope.' ■

MORE SURVIVORS

- Pianist **Paul Wittgenstein** lost his right arm in the First World War. Far from being deterred he set about commissioning the great and the good to write new works just for the left hand. The results include works by Britten, Hindemith and Strauss as well as the famous Ravel and Prokofiev concertos for one hand.

- **Yo-Yo Ma** was diagnosed with severe scoliosis in the 1980s and was told that the operation he needed could leave him unable to play. Luckily he escaped unscathed – and five centimetres taller...



- **Leon Fleischer's** career as a concert pianist was disrupted when he was 35 by the onset of dystonia, a neurological disorder that made him unable to play with his right hand. He set about making definitive recordings of the left-hand repertoire and won many Grammy nominations. Years later, Botox injections enabled him to use his right hand again, and in 2004, Vanguard Classics released *Two Hands*, his first 'two-handed' disc in four decades, to critical acclaim.