

You probably started playing at the age of five. You were good and started to get noticed at school. The Royal Academy, Royal College, Juilliard, perhaps, naturally followed. It wasn't long before you were clear that you wanted to be a professional musician – music was your life. So what on earth do you do when you suddenly discover you have a serious illness that means you may never play again?

This horrendous predicament was exactly that faced by Canadian born pianist Janina Fialkowska – whose flourishing career faced a black hole when she discovered she had a rare and virulent cancer in her left arm. Hers is a story of quite incredible courage, belief and stamina. More than 30 years before her fateful diagnosis in 2002, Fialkowska's career was riding high. After winning Artur Rubinstein's inaugural Master Piano Competition in Israel back in 1974 her career was launched and she became a close friend and protégé of the pianist. Indeed, such was his total belief in her talent that towards the end of Rubinstein's own career, he would only accept invitations to play if they were backed up by a reciprocal engagement for Fialkowska whom he hailed as 'a true Chopin interpreter.'

Determined:
Janina Fialkowska

Ill fortune

It is every musician's nightmare – an injury or sickness that threatens to stop a career in its tracks. And when it happens, the music business can suddenly become a cold and unfeeling place. Nina Large tells the remarkable story of pianist Janina Fialkowska, and talks to organisations that can help musicians in difficulty



Before the storm:
Janina Fialkowska with
Zubin Mehta in 1975

It was within weeks of completing a huge European tour that she noticed her left shoulder was swollen. Both she and her new husband Harry Oesterle – himself a musicologist running Germany's leading period instrument festival – put it down to too much hard work. 'We laughed and said I had been playing too much Liszt!' Indeed she thought so little of it that she went to a chiropractor rather than a doctor. But it wasn't long before the reality became more sinister and she was whisked off to the Sloane Kettering Hospital in New York, and after a biopsy, given the shattering news.

With more than 50 concerts a year and a debut tour of Australia coming up, the pressure to perform was incredible. But the prospect of two gruelling operations over a period of eight months made it clear that she was going to have to do what every professional dreads doing – call

up and cancel. In the first six-hour operation in May 2002 surgeons cut through a major nerve in order to remove a 12cm tumour and chunks of two separate muscles. In spite of everything, Fialkowska refused to give 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 decided I would win.'

True to herself, just one week after surgery she hauled out the Ravel piano concerto for left hand and ordered the Prokofiev. No matter that she could not play with that hand, she just transcribed them for her right and got to work. The music industry in her home country of Canada jumped to and eagerly rearranged the orchestras engaged to work with her for the next season to change their programmes. The reviews were ecstatic.

But things elsewhere were not so straightfor-

ward. The Australian tour idea dissolved. 'I lost out on that,' she says flatly. 'There was never any question of saying "Oh well we'll hold the concerts for when you get well," or inviting me back.' To make matters worse, a lack of personal connection had encouraged Fialkowska to leave her US manager just before the onset of her cancer and now she had no agent. Finding a new one was proving impossible. 'They just didn't want to know. They wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole,' she recalls grimly. The stark reality was that with the cancer lingering over her no agent was prepared to take the risk. 'They weren't sure that I would play again – that I would ever be able to maintain a career.'

Because her type of cancer was so rare the second operation in January 2003 required pioneering surgery, the likes of which had never before been performed in the States. The surgeons were

to detach a muscle from her back, pull it up and reattach it under her left shoulder blade giving her a completely new muscle to do the job of the three muscles which had been removed. 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 keyboard. Fialkowska was forbidden to move her arm for five months, except with a physiotherapist – she even had to sleep in a brace.

They were tough times, even for one so determinedly 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.'

Nonetheless, Fialkowska showed her mettle again. During recovery she wrote a book of memoirs about her life, particularly about her friendship with Rubinstein, and she put renewed efforts into her longstanding music outreach charity, Piano Plus.

While the industry at large may not have given her a shoulder to cry on, the support she received from her fellow musicians was tremendous. 'Every day from wherever he was in the world I got an email, or a phone call from Emanuel (Ax), Angela Hewitt, Imogen Cooper, and Geoffrey Swann were also a wonderful support; always asking, caring, phoning, writing.'

Finally the doctors allowed her to try and start moving her arm. Germany's renowned centre for prosthetics, the Hessing Clinic, designed her a special brace which held her left arm up to the keyboard. She hated having to wear it – 'It made me feel uncomfortable and handicapped,' she remembers – but she knew it was a vital part of her recovery. Alongside highly specialised physiotherapy and many slow painful hours of exercises, with the help of 'Brace Kelly', Fialkowska set about the arduous task of re-teaching her hand to play. She could keep her hand at the keyboard for short bursts but the most immediate problem was that she could only move her arm laterally, and with a very small range.

For a Liszt, Chopin and Brahms aficionado this was not good but typically she came up with a solution; to play the baroque works which only required the centre of the keyboard – Bach and Mozart in particular. 'My heart sank a little bit when I thought I couldn't get far enough down to the left to play Chopin. Beautiful as [those other works] were I really, really hoped I could get as far as Chopin. That was my absolute goal.' Bit by bit, as strength and movement allowed, she returned to her old repertory.

It was clear to her that she needed to get back into the game, and as her life's passion she wanted

nothing more. With no agent, her husband took on the task of booking her concerts. 'The industry is extremely unforgiving. Competition is great and I knew to make a comeback I had to do it as quickly and as dramatically as possible.' No wonder then, that in January 2004 she included the Chopin B minor sonata in her triumphant and emotional two-handed return to the stage.

You might have thought that would be where the story would end. But for Fialkowska there were still several more mountains to climb. For almost two years of performing she had been cancer-free until one heart-stopping day she found out her cancer had returned, this time in her lung. It came back not once but three times – in 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Such devastatingly bad fortune seems unjust on many levels. Having succeeded in making a big-splash comeback in 2004 in spite of every-

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thing, it was particularly unfair to be faced with her career in jeopardy again. Husband Harry's work as her agent was paying off and concerts in North America were building up fast. While she never hid the fact she was ill again, she certainly didn't want to broadcast the fact that her cancer had returned.

The lung operations were agony. 'To get to my lungs they had to go through my ribs – they didn't dare go through my back because they didn't want to ruin my new muscle. It was far more painful even than the arm operations.'

'In effect you can call it luck that the lung cancers fell in the summer where there was less work so I didn't really have to cancel that much each time,' she says. Luck? Not a word that springs to mind. But such was her desperation not to miss out again. It was as if the music industry was becoming as much of a battleground as the hospital.

It doesn't seem right that an artist of such considerable talent can feel so much at the mercy of the wheels of the industry. But of course 'The show must go on,' and the hard fact is that for every person whose career falls down, for whatever reason, there is someone else to step into the limelight.

Naomi Wayne, chief executive of BAPAM – the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine – has seen this problem time and again.

'Performers are terrified their career will be halted because of their problem, if the industry finds out. Often people will play through the pain to keep their injuries a secret.'

It is understandable – a musician's life revolves around a career completely bound up with their identity and they want nothing to put that at risk. Wayne has frequently seen players create a unique technique so that they can literally play around the problem, something which Fialkowska has also done to an extent, moving her body around to help her arms. To a degree this is a sensible solution, but Wayne is convinced that the impact of this can cause many more serious problems. To that end BAPAM has a team of doctors and specialists including leading orthopedic surgeons, physiotherapists and rheumatologists as well as a team who hope to redress the lack of health education specific to performing artists.

Of Fialkowska's lung operations she says pragmatically: 'I just didn't want to miss out on concerts.' After the last operation in 2007 she performed the Chopin E minor just six weeks later.

Fialkowska is not unrealistic. She thinks it was 'predictable' that things were tough, but she is frank when she describes the industry as 'cold and calculating' and wishes it was not so. 'I wish there were a few more idealists in the administrative side of the music business,' she says. '[These days] it really is much more of a business and much less an artistic idealistic endeavour.'

On top of the emotional difficulties the threat of financial ruin is a serious pressure on those who suffer a setback in their career. In Fialkowska's case – with six operations including the biopsy and two years out of work, as well as Harry having a whole year out of work to be with her – the costs before US health care reforms were extortionate. If she had not just inherited some money after her mother died, she believes she would have lost her home.

David Sulkin, chief executive of the Musicians Benevolent Fund, is no stranger to musicians facing difficulties in their careers. 'There is no finger of blame here,' he says with reference to Fialkowska. 'But I think the profession itself doesn't really reflect on what it does to its performers. [I think] the industry could be helped to be much more

thoughtful about the way it behaves. She might expect some loyalty from the administrative side of the industry. The fact was she was suddenly untouchable when she actually needed support, love and respect. You're either earning and making money for your agent or you're not. It's very cruel.'

Unknown to Fialkowska her situation is exactly the sort that the fund could have helped. It gives out approximately £2.5m each year to musicians facing all sorts of problems, from young players, to those with career difficulties, right up to pensioners in need of help with housing.

Fialkowska happily describes herself as from the old school in the way she plays and in the way she thinks. 'I strongly believe that classical music was never meant to be a money-making business. There is something wrong about that whole concept.' She cites Rubinstein, who famously never asked for a fee greater than what could be taken at the box office and who, even up to his last tour of England was playing in smaller towns such as Farnborough and Huddersfield.

'There's a terrible attitude now. People go and see concerts, they don't go and hear them. It's different. I really believe it's changed that much. There is now so much emphasis on marketing and publicity and that is something I truly had no knowledge of. Luckily Harry did and does.'

Fialkowska started her career in the 'Rubinstein age' – she inherited his managers, the Hurok Company, many of whom started their careers in the early 20th century – and mockingly describes herself as 'a dinosaur'. Although she was completely off work for only two years, her illness represents a watershed. 'Either I want to play or I don't,' she admits. To that end she has hired an independent PR agent to publicise her UK dates. The very thought is clearly still alien to her: 'If someone had suggested to Rubinstein 40 years ago that he needed a publicist he would have laughed in their face. But these days it's necessary. That's been a big eye opener.'

Fialkowska is still on the look-out for a European agent. Having started her career with agents falling into her lap it is not so easy now as a middle-aged woman in the middle of her career. It is something which is understandably a little hard to swallow. 'What is difficult is that by now I would have thought it would no longer be necessary – that it would all be automatic.'

The thing which keeps her going is music itself. 'There will always be musicians who are musicians out of love of music and there will always be a core audience that will love to come to concerts for the music and for no other reason – that I'm convinced of. It makes me more determined than ever to keep on playing.'

Last month Fialkowska was given the all clear, and she is now celebrating three years of being cancer-free. Until then she has really been

living day by day, waiting for the tests every few months and knowing that while she continued to build up her career, the whole thing could come crashing down at any moment, again. 'There was always the thought – what if they find something? But now my next appointment is nearly a year away I know everything is going to be ok. I am looking into the future for the very first time.'

There is much to look forward to. She has 50 concerts scheduled for 2010 including a welcome return to the UK and the world premiere of a Chopin-inspired piano concerto *Prelude Variations* written for her by John Burge. Her double-album of Chopin études and sonatas will be re-released in June and she has plans to make a disc of lesser-known Liszt pieces next year.

Her current release *Chopin Recital* (ATMA Classique) reached No 1 on Amazon's best-seller list over Easter and has had rave reviews. Amid a predictable sea of Chopin anniversary releases, hers has been described as 'without doubt one of the most beautiful contributions' (Frank Siebert, Fono-Forum Germany) with 'nothing more enjoyable or recommendable' (Andrew Clark, *Financial Times*). 'Wrap your ears around the real thing,' Norman Lebrecht said.

While things have been quite impossibly tough for her, and remain unfairly so at times, Fialkowska's refusal to give up in the face of adversity is inspiring. She is feted for her warm, intimate playing, eschewing unnecessary theatrics. Similarly she speaks in a quiet and self-effacing way, brushing off difficulties. Underneath it though, there is iron strength. 'In these tremendous life-and-death situations you suddenly realise what you are capable of and what you are not capable of. The most important thing is once you know all about yourself, go on and think about other people – thinking about other people, like Harry, is really what got me through it.'

Despite remaining in pain 80% of the time she repeatedly astounds her doctors as her arm continues to improve, some six years on. 'I was told that it would plateau after two years but I am playing pieces this year that I absolutely couldn't play, even three years ago. In a way the difficulties of the comeback have been beneficial to me. If it had come too quickly I wouldn't have been able to do it and I could have injured my arm again.'

Throughout her life Chopin has been at the heart of her work and soul and it is fitting that his anniversary has coincided with her full return to the stage. She says simply, 'The day that I realised I could play Chopin again was one of the happiest days of my life.'

Janina Fialkowska plays Cadogan Hall, London on 25 and 27 May and Fairfield Hall, Croydon on 26 May
www.fialkowska.com

PIANISTS' CASEBOOK

MENG-CHIEH LIU



Taiwanese pianist who suffered from an exceedingly rare disorder of the immune system which left him in hospital weighing just six stone. His right hand

was so atrophied he could barely press the notes on a keyboard, but two months after surgeons implanted a titanium nail to replace a withered tendon in his hand he started to play again and made his comeback. He continues to perform and teach

MARGARET FINGERHUT



Frozen shoulder caused her right arm to get more and more painful and immobile until she was virtually paralysed. After an operation she faced

a long road back to the concert platform, but she has successfully made it and continues to perform today

LEON FLEISHER



Suffered from focal dystonia causing a twisting in the muscles of the fingers on his right hand. His performances for left hand became legendary though

in recent years he has re-acquired the use of his right hand with the help of botox injections

PAUL WITTGENSTEIN

The pianist who famously lost his right arm



in world war one but continued to perform with his left hand only. He developed unique techniques to play including pedal and hand movement

combinations that allowed him to play music previously deemed impossible for one hand. The works he commissioned for the left hand form its core repertoire including Strauss, Prokofiev, Ravel and Britten