

My fingers never lost anything'

Doctors thought the concert pianist would never play again, but she proved them wrong

By SARAH HAMPSON

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If the swelling had been in her leg, Janina Fialkowska would have called the doctor immediately.

But it was in her left upper arm. As an international concert pianist, she figured her muscles had been overtaxed. It was 2001, and the Montreal-born musician, who is 53, was in the midst of preparing for an ambitious tour in which she would perform Franz Liszt's 12 Transcendental Études, a gruelling program few pianists attempt.

"My arm was starting to hurt, so I went to my chiropractor in Connecticut," explains Fialkowska, who, with her German husband, Harry Oesterle, lives in Weston, Conn., and Irsee, Germany. "He took one look at it and said, 'You don't need me. You need an orthopedic surgeon.' Still thinking nothing, I went to one; I had an MRI, and he said, 'I'm sending you immediately to Sloan-Kettering cancer hospital [in New York.]' "

In one of those nightmarish tumbles into the world of cancer, Fialkowska found she had a rare and very aggressive tumour wrapped around the muscle of her upper arm. The only good news was that it hadn't spread to her bones. "I don't think I'd cancelled a concert in 20 years, and I was immediately cancelling all my engagements," she says in a calm, soft-spoken manner.

With most patients, the doctors would have operated immediately to remove the 12-centimetre-long tumour. But they wanted to proceed cautiously in order to minimize damage to her arm. After three months of intense radiation to shrink the tumour as much as possible, they operated. "They had to cut through a major nerve," she explains. "There's a part of my arm that doesn't feel anything. But my fingers never lost anything. There were no muscles to the fingers involved." Still, the lead surgeon, a woman named Dr. Carol Morris, feared Fialkowska would never play the piano again.

What she could not have known is the dogged determination her patient possessed to rehabilitate herself. "I couldn't lift my left hand up to the keyboard," Fialkowska recalls. So she held it up herself with her good arm, and exercised the fingers of her left hand every day. She went to physiotherapy, and to keep herself engaged musically, played one-handed concertos, composed for the left hand, by transferring them to the right.

She was to have reconstructive surgery a year later, in which a back muscle is severed at one end and reattached to the damaged arm, but doctors, encouraged by her recovery, decided to proceed with it eight months after the initial operation. "By May, I could lift my hand up to the piano, and from that moment, it went very quickly. By the end of May, I was able to play Chopin again," she says.

The dates of her illness and recovery are marked forever in her mind, and when she speaks of them, which she often does, her tone of voice deepens with emotion. The thought of losing her ability to play with two hands was so traumatic, she rarely allowed herself time to entertain it.

During her convalescence, she not only practised daily, she also wrote a memoir, as yet unpublished, and decided to expand a touring initiative in Canada, called Encore Six, that builds on the success of Piano Six, a program she started in 1994. (In 2000, Piano Six was awarded the prestigious National Music Award by the Chalmers Foundation.) In an attempt to bring classical music to rural communities across Canada, Fialkowska, who was admitted to the Order of Canada in 2002, and some of the country's top classical musicians, give concerts and master classes in schools and communities where live performances rarely happen. Pledging their involvement over 10 years, the artists take time away from their international touring schedule to perform at a fraction of their usual fees.

"One does think about dying," says Fialkowska, who has resumed her career although she has cut back her repertoire to what she loves most. "And it crystallized in my mind that of all the things that I've done in my life, this project is one of the most important." Apart from the often-cited benefit of helping children improve mathematical skills, classical music "is something beautiful, something mankind can be proud of," Fialkowska says.

"The music of Chopin, the music of Mozart, the music of Ravel, these are major achievements of a species. To have the feeling that they are going to be lost, well, it's like suddenly someone taking all the Picasso paintings, all the Rembrandts, and saying, 'We don't need to see these any more.' "

Her remarkable recovery from cancer -- Fialkowska is the only patient at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center with this type of aggressive cancer not to have had a recurrence -- is just one more point on a trajectory full of life-altering events, she says. "I am always pushed right to the limit, and then something good happens."

Her late mother, Bridget Todd Fialkowska, whose family goes back five generations in Canada and includes ancestors of Irish, Scottish and Cree heritage, was a pianist herself. After marrying Jerzy Fialkowska, whom she met during the Second World War, when she was employed as a driver for the Polish forces, she started to teach her daughter, the younger of her two children, to play the piano at the age of 4. Having studied in Paris as a young woman, she later decided to ask her former teacher if her daughter, then aged 9, had any promise. Yes, came the reply, after the two travelled to France. Subsequently, Janina was sent off to École Vincent-d'Indy in Montreal, then one of the most prestigious music schools in the country, and later attended The Study, a private girls' school in Westmount, where the teachers rearranged her academic requirements around her rigorous practising schedule of six hours a day.

"It was very clear, right from the start, that I loved the piano. Let's just say that I didn't resist the many hours of practice," she says. She graduated from high school on her 16th birthday, after skipping grades. She attended the University of Montreal and then moved to Paris to continue musical studies.

By the time she was 23, however, she was ready to give it all up. "I had not played a professional concert," she explains. "It was almost impossible for a woman, a Canadian woman, to make a career as a concert pianist at that time. So I had lost heart." After studying for a year at the Juilliard School in New York, she decided to enter law school at the University of Montreal.

But fate intervened. In 1973, the world-renowned pianist Arthur Rubinstein had organized a competition in Tel Aviv, which had to be postponed due to the Arab-Israeli war known as the Yom Kippur War. In September, 1974, on short notice, he decided to resurrect it. At first, Fialkowska declined because she would miss the first few days of law school. Friends and teachers persuaded her to go.

"I met Arthur Rubinstein and he just said, 'Right, I'm going to look after you.' He was looking to stop his career at that time [he was 88] and he wanted someone to pass on knowledge to," she recalls. "He was just flabbergasted that I didn't have a career."

Fialkowska won third prize at the competition. To help launch her, Rubinstein made the stipulation that every venue in his upcoming and final tour had to host Fialkowska the following year.

"So I went from zero to about 60 concerts. And I went from zero to playing the next year with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the London Philharmonic. It was just amazing," she says.

Another turning point was her marriage at the age of 50. "I had a very nice life. It's just that the perfect person didn't come along until Harry," she says. A girlish smile crosses her calm, serious face. "Life begins at 50," she adds.

"I'm living the best part of my life right now," Fialkowska says. "I'm playing well because I've had all this rest and all this time to think about it." She practises now only three hours a day. "I do a lot of thinking about my music away from the piano, which is much better," she explains.

There were some dark moments, she acknowledges at one point. "The day before my operation, when they were to remove the tumour, I knew I would certainly not be able to play the piano for maybe years, maybe forever. I went to the instrument in my house in Connecticut, and I played everything that I loved best. I played all afternoon, and I got tired and my arm was all burnt from radiation and so sore." She looks up briefly from her lunch, betraying, for the first time, a vulnerability beneath the veneer of her determined, take-control personality. "It was very difficult."

Janina Fialkowska plays at Montreal's Place des Arts on Jan. 31, and performs with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra at the Orpheum Theatre on April 30, May 1 and 2.