

# IN THE KEY OF LIFE

A fighter takes her show on the back roads again

**FROM THE AGE** of 4 you spend hours at the piano perfecting the classics. By 25, you're selling out concerts on both sides of the Atlantic. For the next quarter-century, critics consider you one of the world's greatest musicians. Then one day in January 2002, doctors discover a highly aggressive malignant tumour in your upper left arm, forcing you to step back from the instrument you love. A paralyzing blow for most people. But not for Janina Fialkowska. "Sometimes I made myself think that my playing wouldn't come back," says Fialkowska, 53. "I'd get upset for a few seconds, but always remained optimistic. I knew I'd play again. Guess I'm just stubborn."

Not to mention lucky, and incredibly passionate about her art—something she'd already demonstrated by founding Piano Six, now expanded and being relaunched this fall as Encore Six, to send musicians to small-town Canada. After months of radiation to shrink the tumour, surgery to remove the growth left the Montreal-born virtuoso unable to raise her hand to the keyboard. So she taught herself how to play music written for the left hand, using only her right. Eight months later, a muscle from her back was transplanted into her limp left arm. "Five months after the second surgery I was able to hold my hand to the keyboard, but could only move it a short distance," recalls Fialkowska, who splits her time between homes she and her husband, German impresario Harry Oesterle, own in Weston, Conn., Augsburg,



Undaunted by cancer, Fialkowska is once more onstage and in small-town Canada

Germany, and Montreal. "I had to order my hand down the keyboard, but within two weeks was playing Chopin. It took six months of building up muscle memory to really play, but at that moment I knew I was back."

Her recovery—all the more miraculous given that doctors believed she'd never play professionally again—was complete last spring when Fialkowska performed at Toronto's George Weston Recital Hall. "I certainly worked my tear ducts at rehearsal," says the one-time protege of the legendary Artur Schnabel. "That night was sheer joy." Except for having to lean slightly to her left to reach all the keys, little in her playing has changed. The only major difference is fatigue. "I used to practise six hours a day and now only do about three," she says. "Chopin told his students not to work more than three hours a day because the brain can't take it. I practise more in my head now. And my husband and I power walk every morning. I've never been in such great shape."

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Physical fitness isn't the only positive outcome of her illness. The two years of recovery also allowed Fialkowska to reorganize Piano Six, the music program she started in 1994 with the help of five other world-class domestic musicians. The not-for-profit organization funds artist trips to small Canadian towns and cities and rural communities to introduce school kids and adults to classical music through workshops, master classes and concerts. "Just like people should be able to walk into a museum and look at a Rembrandt," says Fialkowska, "they should be able to enjoy classical music."

Pianist Jon Kimura Parker was the first musician Fialkowska contacted a decade ago with her idea. "Piano Six made me come alive as a musician in a way unique to all other experiences," says the Vancouver native, who teaches at Houston's Rice University. "The most memorable concerts I've given have been at the Berlin Philharmonie, my first time at Carnegie Hall, and in Iqaluit. The trip to Baffin Island was an incredible sharing of music. At one point the entire gym of kids sang their school song to me."

Fialkowska kicks off Encore Six this month in the Maritimes and hopes that her team—now up to 21 artists, not all pianists—will visit more than 100 places in 2005. "The concerts are the scariest to do because it's such a huge responsibility," she says. "This is the first time these kids are hearing someone like Chopin or Bach. It may be the most important thing I've done in my entire life." ■