

How pianist Janina Fialkowska beat cancer



Janina Fialkowska: "There's more serenity in my playing now" Times photographer, Jack Hill

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The pianist Janina Fialkowska defied the odds to beat cancer in her arm. It still defines her, but inspires others

If the pianist Janina Fialkowska had her way, she would never again have to talk about the cancer that threatened her life and career. It is, after all, ten years since she had a malignant tumour removed from her left arm, losing so much muscle that her piano-playing days were surely over. But since then, though, the Canadian has released two Chopin recordings and a universally praised Liszt recital, and embarks on a UK tour this month.

Does Fialkowska worry that, as an artist, she is for ever defined by her cancer recovery? "Yes, I feel that horribly, and I wish the story would go away. About five years ago I said I would never talk about it again. And then I was persuaded — this sounds sort of

corny — that I was actually doing some good. When you write about it I'll get e-mails from cancer patients saying: 'Your story inspires me.' ”

Now 61, Fialkowska was taught the piano from the age of 5 by her mother — “she transferred all her ambitions to me” — but by 23, despite her talent, she was “desperate” and depressed. In North America in the Seventies the recital doors were closed to solo female pianists. Fialkowska had decided to give up music for law when the great Arthur Rubinstein took her under his wing. She came third in his inaugural International Piano Master Competition — Emanuel Ax won — and Rubinstein, then 87, secured the young pianist a 44-date world tour.

“If Rubinstein tells you you're OK, you've gotta do something,” reflects Fialkowska, who quickly established herself as having the maestro's affinity for Chopin.

Last May, Fialkowska was awarded Canada's highest arts gong, the Governor General's Lifetime Artistic Achievement award for classical music. She smiles about the three-day celebrations, which were held around the same time she reached the five-year cancer-free mark.

Fialkowska is phenomenally positive even when describing her cancer. When doctors discovered a 5in-long tumour in her left shoulder, it wasn't the stage III (locally advanced) cancer that scared Fialkowska but the idea that she might never play the piano again. “I woke up, desperate, about four times in the night. Cancer in your arm? It makes no sense.”

Initially, Fialkowska performed piano works written for the left hand and transposed them to the right. Then in 2003 surgeons performed a rare muscle-transfer operation; attaching the *latissimus dorsi* — a muscle in the back — to her left shoulder. “And then I trained it to play the piano,” says Fialkowska, pointing to her arm.

The surgeons did not believe it would be possible. “They thought I'd never play again, but they didn't tell me that. I just had to believe I'd play. I never had a Plan B.”

For two months she wasn't allowed to move her left arm at all. Then the hard work began — months of physio, first to lift her hand to the piano and then to relearn the muscle memory of how to play. “I order my arm down the keyboard now — it's not automatic.”

Fialkowska can still move her left arm only just as far as she needs to play; she cannot move it at all above the elbow, where it remains glued limply to her side. She can't practise for more than three and a half hours a day because of the pain. “When I do think about it, my arm is very badly handicapped. But I never think I have a disadvantage playing the piano. It's fully functional for the pieces I choose.”

Fialkowska's comeback is astonishing for another reason. “Considering who's being promoted so highly these days, I fully realise I'm ... not elderly, but I'm in elderly middle-age, and I'm not the slimmest. So, yes, I am surprised.”

The music business she left so abruptly has transformed in a decade: CD boom and bust, the rise of crossover and “hot” young stars (some cute first and talented second)

and financial straits for the arts. I'm not sure Fialkowska likes what she sees, especially as a protégée of Rubinstein who, she says, had a policy never to demand ridiculous fees, at least from smaller venues.

“These people who ask for \$80,000 or \$90,000 [for one recital] could ruin it for everybody. They could bring down the classical music business with their stupid fees. That's part of the problem now; people are entering the music business because they want to make money and be famous. We entered it because we loved music.”

Fialkowska, who judges various piano competitions, is also dismayed by “athletic” piano playing: “Play as fast as you can and as accurately as you can. When there's supposed to be emotion, you quickly paste it on.”

Flashy performance is as far from her own style as you can get; onstage you'll see no unnecessary flourish or theatricals, just those rippling fingers immersing the listener in her musical intensity.

Post-operation and healing she has had to say a sad goodbye to some “old warhorses” — Liszt's Second Piano Concerto, for instance — and embrace a new repertoire including “mature, wise” Schubert. “Before this all happened, I was the woman who played the big virtuoso things. But my focus has shifted. There's more serenity in my playing.

“When I realised I could play Chopin again, it was ... you can't imagine! So if anyone thinks they should be feeling pity, they shouldn't. I'm doing exactly what I want.”

Janina Fialkowska begins a five-date UK tour with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on Jan 23 at the Fairfield Halls, Croydon (020-8688 9291) and plays at the Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020-7935 2141) on Apr 8

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