

Prognosis is much better for Janina Fialkowska

By Jessica Duchen

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In 2002 Canadian pianist Janina Fialkowska noticed a swelling on her left arm. "As I was preparing for a tour involving some difficult Liszt pieces, I thought perhaps it was to do with overwork." The truth was different. It was an aggressive tumour, 12cm in diameter, which required immediate removal of a large section of arm muscle. The operation also severed a nerve.

"When I woke up afterwards, I couldn't move my arm. There was no feeling at all," she says. "But my fingers worked; they'd managed to save all the muscles going into them." Experimental treatment in Switzerland then transferred back muscle to her shoulder.

She made transcriptions for the right hand of some of the piano's left-hand-only repertoire and continued to give concerts: "At least I could feel I was still a musician." Then there came "a glorious day" when she found she could lift her left arm to the keyboard, though building up the arm's ability took a long time.

Although they had not told her, doctors had believed she would never perform again. Luckily they were wrong. Fialkowska has suffered several relapses of cancer in her lungs, but has now been free of the illness for three years. In her view, the experience has changed her approach for the better.

"I was always 'the woman pianist who played all the terribly difficult pieces that were usually reserved for men'. Now I don't care about showing off my technique and I much prefer not playing five different recital programmes and 18 different concertos every year. I play maybe one programme and eight concertos. I am much more in love with the music and a much happier musician. Every time I walk out on stage I am grateful. And this is the year where I really feel I'm back."

Janina Fialkowska gives a Chopin recital at Cadogan Hall, London, on 25 May, and plays his First Piano Concerto at Fairfield Halls, Croydon and then at Cadogan Hall on 26 and 27 May

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