

Pretty useful poison for American pianist Leon Fleisher

By Jessica Duchen

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My late father, a neuropathologist, wrote his MD thesis on the therapeutic effects of botulinum toxin on the nerves of muscles in spasm. He would have been moved to know that his research fed developments that later transformed the life of a musician he greatly admired: the American pianist Leon Fleisher, who is performing at Aldeburgh.

As a young soloist, Fleisher found that the fingers of his right hand were curling under. "Over about 10 months," he says, "it worsened so two fingers virtually dug into my palm." He embarked on "endless visits to doctors and a search that lasted 35 years with no answers".

In the mid-1990s Fleisher embarked on a treatment in which minute doses of the lethal toxin botulinum are injected into the root of the nerve that forces the muscular contraction, paralysing it. It restored the use of his arm at last.

Remarkably, he has no regrets. "After a couple of years in a deep depression, I realised my connection to music was not exclusively as a two-handed pianist," he says. "It was a little more profound. It expanded my teaching: I could no longer demonstrate at the piano, but instead had to find words – so I think I became a better teacher. It freed me up to examine literature for the left hand alone. And it gave me the idea to start conducting. Were I to live my life over again I'm not sure I would change anything."

The Aldeburgh Festival opens today (www.aldeburgh.co.uk)