

It is perhaps the textbook definition of irony: At a “wellness hotel” in the Bavarian Alps internationally acclaimed pianist Janina Fialkowska, then 50, was startled by the visible manifestation of a problem that had been bothering her throughout the fall of 2001. Recently married, she and her husband, Harry Oesterle, had decided to take three days off in December to rest and rejuvenate before the onset of a demanding European concert tour.



While swimming in the hotel pool Ms. Fialkowska saw that her left shoulder, which had been sore for months, was so swollen that “it looked like a football pad,” she says. Although she’d never had problems with her hands or arms, she nevertheless attributed the swelling to overuse.

In spite of discomfort, Ms. Fialkowska played a challenging concert in Germany on January 13, 2002, before flying back to her home in Connecticut where she went to see a chiropractor. “He took one look at my arm and said, ‘This isn’t my department,’” Ms. Fialkowska remembers. The chiropractor sent her to an orthopaedic surgeon who ordered an MRI. The resulting images showed a mass in Ms. Fialkowska’s upper arm. The orthopaedic surgeon immediately referred her to MSKCC orthopaedic surgeon Carol D. Morris.

Dr. Morris performed a biopsy, and pathology studies revealed that the mass was a soft tissue sarcoma. Sarcomas are a rare group of tumors that arise from connective tissues such as bone and muscle. MSKCC has been tracking soft tissue sarcoma patients since 1982 and maintains

Carol Morris, MD
SURGEON

MSKCC orthopaedic surgeon Carol Morris operated to remove a rare sarcoma from the left arm of concert pianist Janina Fialkowska.



the largest single-institution database for soft tissue sarcoma in the world. "There are very few cases of the particular tumor subtype that Ms. Fialkowska had," says Dr. Morris.

The tumor in Ms. Fialkowska's arm was large — approximately the size of a grapefruit — and her first question was how its removal might affect her playing. "Dr. Morris said that there was likely to be some nerve and muscle damage from the surgery although she couldn't be sure how much," says Ms. Fialkowska. "And while she didn't give me false hope, she promised that she and other MSKCC doctors would do their very best to help me. That's what's so unique about Sloan-Kettering: It wasn't just a question of removing the cancer — it was also a question of getting me to play the piano again."

In an effort to shrink the tumor before surgery, Ms. Fialkowska underwent five weeks of external beam radiation therapy delivered by MSKCC radiation oncologist Kaled M. Alektiar. And Ms. Fialkowska makes the surprising admission that those weeks "were sort of fun. The radiation technicians were

wonderful and scheduled my treatments for the afternoon, so most days I was able to practice in the morning. Then Harry and I would drive into Manhattan. Because of my touring schedule, we'd never been together for so long and we took full advantage of the time. We went to the opera, to art galleries, to restaurants, we cooked." In spite of what was to come, Ms. Fialkowska smiles and says, "We were just happy together."

In May, Dr. Morris operated to remove the sarcoma. Ms. Fialkowska spent the afternoon before the surgery playing through her favorite composers in the event that this might be the last time she'd be able to do so. "I started with Mozart, then played some Liszt, then Schubert, Schumann, Ravel, and Chopin — lots of Chopin. I ended with the beautiful third movement of his third sonata," Ms. Fialkowska recalls. "Then I shut the piano. I know Harry was upstairs in tears. It was a hard moment."

During surgery, Dr. Morris found that the tumor hadn't shrunk as much as was necessary for her to save a critical nerve. "Some sarcomas are predictable in their response to

therapy, some are less so," Dr. Morris comments. However, surgery went well and Dr. Morris removed the sarcoma. Yet potentially devastating to Ms. Fialkowska's playing, the nerve responsible for lateral as well as some rotational motion had to be sacrificed because it had adhered to the tumor itself.

Ms. Fialkowska entered into intensive physiotherapy and also began to practice with her left-hand fingers for half an hour daily. "What gave me hope was that although I couldn't lift my arm to the keyboard, my finger motion was intact," she says. And she added another dimension to her rehabilitation. During World War I, famed Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein — brother of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein — was wounded and lost his right arm. Unwilling to give up playing, he commissioned several of the great composers of the time to write piano works for the left hand. "About three days after I returned home from the operation I took out the Ravel Piano Concerto for the Left Hand," Ms. Fialkowska reports. "I looked at it and said, 'There's no reason I can't play this with my right arm.' And I got to work."

Janina Fialkowska (from top to bottom): Hiking in the Bavarian Alps with her husband, Harry Oesterle; in a dressing room before a concert; in Rome with her MSKCC surgeon, Carol Morris, who came to Italy to hear Ms. Fialkowska play; warming up before a performance with the Warsaw Philharmonic.



Ms. Fialkowska had been forced to cancel the lion's share of her upcoming concerts because of her illness, but she called several conductors with whose orchestras she still had scheduled engagements to inquire "if they would accept the Ravel or Prokofiev piano concertos for the left hand — played with my right hand." Indeed they would. Her first concert after her surgery was with the Houston Symphony. She played Ravel's Piano Concerto for the Left Hand and remembers thinking, "I'm not going to be nervous at all — what's a concert compared to life and death?" But I was wrong. It was the same adrenaline rush, the same feeling of "I want to play my very best."

In the spring of 2003, after Ms. Fialkowska had remained disease free for seven months, MSKCC orthopaedic surgeon Edward A. Athanasian performed an operation called a latissimus transfer in which he rerouted a muscle from Ms. Fialkowska's back to her upper arm with the intention of restoring some use of the limb. "Dr. Athanasian asked me how much motion I needed to play. I showed him that I had to be able to hold my hand to the keyboard and I needed some lateral motion. And he gave me virtually everything," says Ms. Fialkowska.

About 12 weeks later, while lying on her living room floor trying to do the exercises her physiotherapist had prescribed, Ms. Fialkowska found that suddenly she could move her arm. She describes the moment: "Harry was upstairs and I called for him. 'Watch this,' I said. I lifted my left hand to the keyboard and played a note. It was incredible." Ms. Fialkowska explains that it took many arduous months and much practice to be able to extend her lateral motion. But, she says, "I knew that even the limited motion I had that first day would be enough for the Baroque and early Classical composers — because they wrote for pianos with a smaller octave range than today's instruments. So I thought, 'Great! I get to play Bach, and Handel, and Mozart, and maybe even early Beethoven.'" Then, four days later — considerably sooner than anyone expected — she reached much farther into the lower registers of the keyboard. "And," she exults, "I realized, 'I can play Chopin again!'"

Since that time, Ms. Fialkowska has had three metastases to her lungs — small, discrete nodules that were successfully removed by MSKCC thoracic surgeon Valerie W. Rusch in three separate operations. Even in the face of these setbacks, though, she has returned to a full concert schedule. But it is not quite business as usual: "Because I have to pay attention to the left-hand parts in a different way than before, I've taken pieces I've played for 20 or 30 years and have injected a new freshness into them," observes Ms. Fialkowska. "In fact, people comment that my left hand is much more interesting — so there's a silver lining to all this."

Both Ms. Fialkowska and her husband sing the praises of MSKCC: "Harry and I always say that there wasn't anyone at Sloan-Kettering who wasn't wonderful," Ms. Fialkowska says. "From my physicians and nurses to the patient escorts to the parking lot attendants — everyone takes the time to make you feel positive about your future."

Janina Fialkowska had set a goal from the moment of her diagnosis: to return two years later to play where she had played the last concert before her ordeal began — on January 13, 2002. On a wintry night in the same former Benedictine monastery in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps, Ms. Fialkowska performed before an international audience of invited guests: It was January 13, 2004. She ended the program with the final piece she'd played the afternoon before her surgery, Chopin's Sonata No. 3.

