

Frozen shoulder sounds like one of those almost jokey ailments like tennis elbow or housemaid's knee. When you are suffering from something with such a trivial, even faintly ridiculous name, people don't quite give you the sympathy vote you feel you deserve. True, it's not life-threatening, and with time most frozen shoulders get more or less better without medical intervention. But even a mild case can be very painful and disabling, and can take many months to recover from. If you're unlucky enough to have it severely, and moreover you're a musician, then it's a nightmare of epic proportions. I was one of the unlucky ones.

My symptoms started over three years ago. Everybody assumes it came about because I must have over-practised, but the reality is that no one really knows what causes frozen shoulder (or adhesive capsulitis as it is also called). Since it is generally a self-limiting, non life-threatening condition, it is not regarded as a particularly sexy branch of medicine, worthy of any high-level research. Hence no one yet knows why scar tissue should form in a previously normal joint, rendering it increasingly stiff and painful. What is known is that the condition occurs equally in active or inactive people, and that right and left arm are equally affected, irrespective of hand dominance.

I was also told that I was a likely candidate to get it because middle-aged women account for nearly two-thirds of all cases (oops, the cat's out the bag, but I have to admit it has been one or two years since I was last described as 'an exciting young talent'). So, my frozen shoulder was just one of those things. Gradually but inexorably over the course of six months, my right arm became more and more immobile until it was virtually paralysed. Even more distressing was the accompanying pain, at times almost unbearable. Nights were the worst. I cancelled all my concerts and became very depressed.

During the course of that year I must have tried almost every known remedy and even a few that weren't. I think I could practically write a Michelin Guide to complementary therapies: acupuncture, osteopathy, physiotherapy, chiropractic, Alexander technique, reflexology, shiatsu, homeopathy, Chinese herbs (yuck!), hypnotherapy, kinesiology. Nor did conventional medicine have much to offer. Anti-inflammatories hardly touched the pain and a series of cortisone injections likewise did nothing. Seeking a cure became virtually a full-time occupation, but apart from something called InterX therapy which gave me occasional relief, nothing had any noticeable effect (except on my bank balance).

My desperation to try anything occasionally found me in absurd situations, like the time I was made to lie on a treatment table while two spiritual healers put crystals in my navel, heated them up and told me what colours were emanating from my soul – 'blue...very dark blue...almost black' (maybe it was because I was thinking of how much money I was wasting on this). Then there was the osteopath whose 'special' method of treating frozen shoulders was to use sheer brute force (unfortunately this treatment was offered without the benefit of anaesthetic). Nothing worked – my shoulder remained obstinately stuck.

Resigning myself to the fact that I was in for a long haul, I devised a recital programme of left-hand pieces to offer for the following season should my right hand still be out of commission. The irony did not escape me that two of my teachers – Cyril Smith and Leon Fleisher – had both been one-handed pianists. I tried to stay positive and motivated. But then, unbelievably, I began to develop problems with my left arm. I naturally feared it to be another frozen shoulder starting up on the other side; it's not uncommon for this to happen. However, it turned out to be a simple case of over-use because, as well as practising the piano, my left hand was also standing in for my right in all my day-to-day activities. Sadly, I had to give up the idea of left-handed concerts.

I had reached the end of the road – my life felt totally stuck, just like my shoulder. The decision to undergo surgery was therefore an easy one. Releasing the adhesions surgically



Playing again: Margaret Fingerhut

Shouldering on

It all started with a bit of pain: concert pianist Margaret Fingerhut reports on her struggle to overcome a career-threatening condition

would give much better odds of a full recovery than just sitting it out forever and hoping. It still amuses me to read the surgeon's report following the operation. Apparently I demonstrated 'a classic frozen shoulder with floridly inflamed synovium particularly in the superior and marked capsular contracture inferiorly with an impossible drive-through sign'. Yep, I couldn't have phrased it better myself.

I was warned that even after the operation it would still be a long and potentially rocky road back to the concert platform. In fact it was to be another year with many ups and downs before I managed to take that step. But it was a wonderful feeling, like coming home after a long, long time away.

When you emerge from a dreadful ordeal, you're meant to trumpet how much the experience has improved and benefited you. So, brushing aside the sad fact that I'll never be able to take up javelin throwing, let me try and list a few positive outcomes. For a start, I've never, ever practised so many scales as I did when I first began playing again. That has to be a good thing. I'm also more relaxed on stage nowadays – it's crucial, as any tension could make my shoulder flare up. And I grumble much less than I used to when I find myself up against a duff instrument – I'm still so deliriously happy to be playing at all.

Margaret Fingerhut will be playing the Elgar piano quintet with the Locrian Ensemble at the Buxton Festival on 18 July. The following week she is at Dartington, playing in several concerts and giving masterclasses. On 29 July she will be giving a lecture/recital on Elgar's piano music at the EPTA Conference at Warwick University. In September she will be making the world premiere recording of Edgar Bainton's Concerto-Fantasia with the BBC Philharmonic and Vernon Handley