

A New *Harmony*

Concert pianist Byron Janis shares his insights on coping with arthritis.

FOR MORE THAN 10 YEARS, ALMOST NO ONE SUSPECTED A THING. Concert pianist Byron Janis acted as though nothing was wrong, continuing to tour the world, performing Chopin and other classical masters to adoring reviews and standing ovations.

“Reviewers said that I played a few wrong notes, but mostly nobody saw it,” recalls Byron, 82, who as a teenager studied under virtuoso pianist Vladimir Horowitz, performed for the great conductor Arturo Toscanini and made his Carnegie Hall debut at age 20. “I thought if I told people about it, they would look at me as a freak.”

“It” was the psoriatic arthritis in Byron’s hands, wrists and fingers that he first noticed in 1973.

A Painful Secret

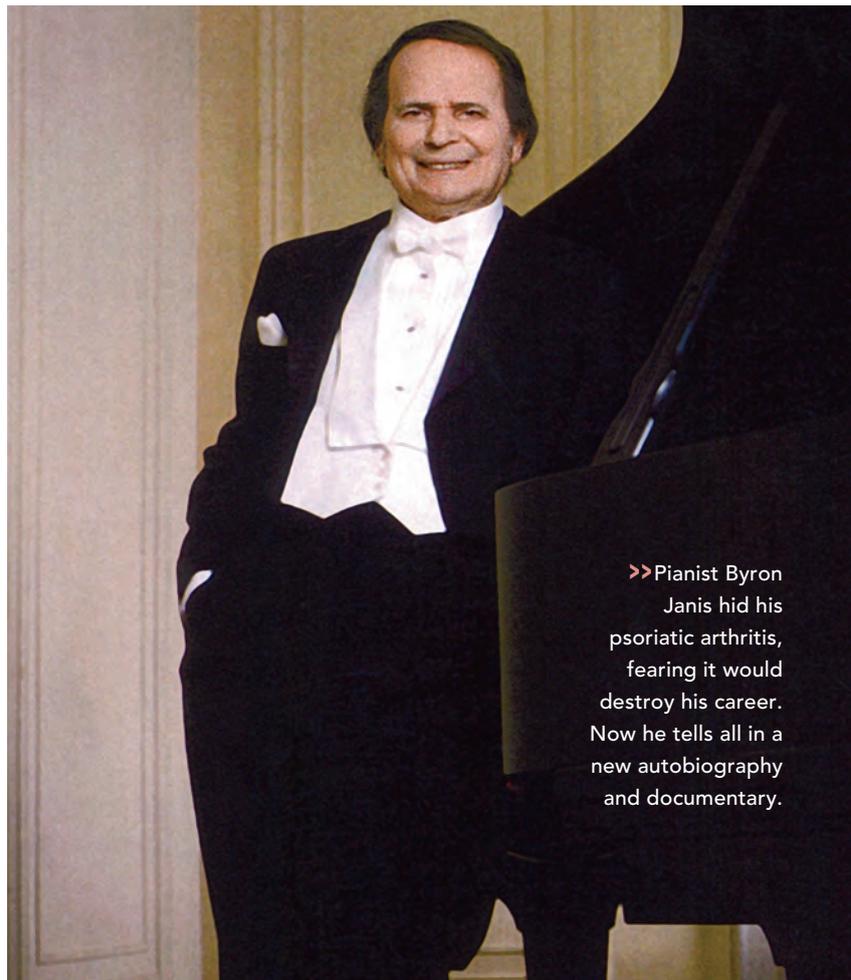
Worried that public disclosure might destroy his career, Byron kept his ailment a secret from everyone except his wife and doctors until a dramatic February 1985 announcement at a White House concert. There he told the world he had become an ambassador for the arts for the Arthritis Foundation, saying, “I have arthritis, but arthritis doesn’t have me.”

During those days of secrecy, Byron recalls, “Iron will get me through. Arthritis taught me to look inside myself for new sources of strength and creativity.” Byron’s autobiography, *Chopin and Beyond* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), appears this fall. He’s also the subject of a new PBS documentary. (Check your local listings for viewing times.) Looking back, he says, “Arthritis has given my life a new intensity.”

The Search for Relief

But it wasn’t willpower alone that got Byron through the pain and hardships of arthritis. Over the years, with the approval of his doctor, he has found varying degrees of success with a wide array of therapies, including acupuncture, dimethyl

sulfoxide (DMSO) anti-inflammatory medication, cortisone injections, electro-stimulation, ultrasound, topical analgesics and gels, hypnotherapy, fluoromethane spray for pain, the Pritikin Diet and physiotherapy. “My wife [Maria, daughter



>>Pianist Byron Janis hid his psoriatic arthritis, fearing it would destroy his career. Now he tells all in a new autobiography and documentary.

of movie legend Gary Cooper] gives me pre-concert massages. They’re very helpful to me,” says Byron.

“Go to a top doctor,” he advises. “Don’t be afraid if you hear about alternative medicine. It can work, but try it only with a doctor’s permission. Different things work for different people. I’ve found all kinds of tricks to overcome this.

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Various things have worked for me at different times, but the one thing that has worked all the time is mind over matter — conscious denial. I say to myself, 'You don't have it,' and I put my mind on other things. Then again, sometimes I try conscious acceptance. I say to myself, 'I've got to accept this,' and then I try to do something about it."

Byron especially credits his deep spiritual beliefs to helping him overcome arthritis. His music is "the closest thing I have to a feeling of God, an unspoken reverie. I talk to Him through my music. I feel a response. Music has always been my path to God," he says.

"Almost nothing is impossible," adds Byron. His physical triumphs prove his point. Not only has he battled arthritis, he had a botched surgery on a thumb that resulted in the loss

“Arthritis taught me to look inside myself for new sources of strength and creativity.”

of a joint and five operations to repair a childhood injury that left his pinkie finger numb. Nonetheless, he says, "My hands look amazingly well, even though all joints at the tips of my fingers are fused."

88 Keys to Success

Though he and his doctor have sought many ways to limit the effects of his arthritis, Byron has one unusual homemade remedy. It involves daily therapy with a large black instrument with 88 black and white keys which, when tapped, pressed and otherwise tickled, make a variety of pleasing sounds.

"Although arthritis is not good for pianists," he jokes, "the piano is good for arthritis. Playing the piano is probably the best exercise for my hands."

Byron has had a long and amazing path for a boy born in McKeesport, Pa., to Russian and Polish immigrant parents. Byron was discovered at age 5 by his kindergarten teacher, Miss McSweeney. When she heard her young pupil at the keyboard in her class, she sent him home with a "mysterious" note pinned to his jacket.

"I thought I was being punished," recalls Byron with a chuckle. Instead, the teacher's letter insisted that the boy immediately begin piano lessons. By age 6, he had performed on the radio, at which point his mother declared, "He's not my child. He belongs to the world!"

"My mother was dramatic," Byron says. "Whenever she got to be too much, I would stop her and say, 'A shoemaker who makes great shoes is a great artist, too.' Whatever you do, it doesn't matter, you can be a great artist at it. Just keep trying. Don't just have one dream. Have dreams, and one of them will come true."

— GEORGE SPENCER