

Mary Feinsinger: Musician and Survivor

by

Suzanne McConnell

"Music has held my life together." A singer and pianist with a master's from The Julliard School and wide-ranging musical accomplishments from opera to jazz, Mary Feinsinger was stricken at two years old with polio. "All the muscles in my left leg were completely shot."

At age seven, she began studying piano. "I started by playing the kitchen table, pretending it was a keyboard, until finally my father said, 'okay, we'll buy her a piano.' Piano was the best thing in my life."

Innumerable operations "to cut and paste me together" enabled her, by age sixteen, to discard the braces she wore on both legs, and by age twenty-five, to stabilize her walking. "I had the best of medical care. My mother was a nurse, so she got me in touch with the best doctors."

Her ankle bones were fused, fascia cut, and muscles transplanted; she spent several long periods in a full body cast. People who scorn Western medicine, she says vehemently, are "tremendously shortsighted. If it weren't for Western medicine, I'd be lying in a doorway somewhere."

A shy kid, suffering the curious looks of others and her difference was torturous to her. "If some God could grant me a wish between looking normal or functioning normally, which would I choose?" she would ask herself. Growing up, she used to choose looking normal over functioning. "Now I'm tending to think functioning."

She trained at Julliard as a mezzo-soprano. "I think I forced myself to be an opera singer." Performing invited what she most feared. "It says 'Look at me everybody.' 'I'm completely comfortable now on the stage but when I started I felt

suicidal, I would come back in tears, in deep depression."

"It's a lumpy world," she says, "Yet human beings are hard-wired to see the normal." Not wanting to be stigmatized, growing up she refused to join or be considered part of a group of disabled. She asserts "I'd rather be a normal person than have any greater strength or greater character" as a result of polio. The child of alcoholic, dysfunctional parents (her father was in and out of mental hospitals), she began psychotherapy at age fourteen; therapists suggested her problems stemmed more from that dysfunction than the polio. She is not so sure.

Although avoiding being grouped as disabled, she felt connected to the civil rights movement and black people since they also suffered discrimination by appearance. "I felt resentful when Black Power came along because they left me out. But that was the beginning of the acceptance of everyone." As a child, she had no civil rights. The first time she heard the term "physically challenged" instead of "disabled," she burst into tears.

In voice training she couldn't distinguish between her stage of development and what she truly was unable to achieve. "I would hear teachers say 'you have to use your whole body' and I would think 'I can never do that.'" She feared she had a "crucial missing muscle." That experience "...makes me a very sensitive teacher. I immediately pick up when a student feels there's something wrong with them, rather than the problem being a stage of development."

Besides teaching voice and piano, she does studio work in jazz and pop, has been a cantor for fifteen years (currently at Rossmor Jewish Congregation in Jamesburg, NJ), is on the Julliard staff as an accompanist, and has performed with her klezmer band, The West End Klezmerim, for a decade (they made a CD entitled Freyklekhs 21, and have played at the West End Gate, Carnegie Hall, and on Garrison Keilor's American Radio Company).

In the past five years, she has started to arrange and compose Jewish liturgical

music for the Transcontinental Music Publishing Company. "I'm paid to compose music! It's miraculous, a gift from God." She also wrote music for an off-Broadway play, "Hot Klezmer," has produced a CD, "Music for a Passover Haggadah," and is currently producing one of Jewish wedding music. Producing, arranging, and composing are backstage and less anxiety producing. But "I guess I had to go through it," she says now about performing.

At her career's beginning, she performed opera and avantgarde contemporary classical music. But eventually, through students, she was drawn to the rhythms of pop and jazz. "I don't know how good I am at jazz. But I get a visceral physical pleasure from it...It's rhythmic, it comes from African dance rhythms, and I couldn't dance."

As a musician, Mary Feinsinger exudes confidence and energy. Like a powerful, expressive dancer, when she plays the piano and sings, she uses her whole body. As she says, "There is a major difference between the terms 'polio victims' and 'polio survivors.'"