

The Washington Post

After a debilitating stroke, a pianist feels his way back to music.

Composer and pianist Haskell Small will give a series of recitals charting his recovery through one-handed repertoire.



(Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

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April 8, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

If you want to prepare yourself for the worst that can happen, learn to play the piano.

At least, this is one of my takeaways from speaking to Haskell Small, a D.C.-based pianist, composer and educator for whom the piano has acquired new significance. Once the anchor of his musical life, his instrument is now something more like a sail, pulling him forward through one of the stormiest passages of his life.

In February 2021, while at home with his wife, Betsy, Small was suddenly unable to stand up or move. He remembers feeling extreme stress just beforehand, he remembers Betsy calling 911 and he recalls the medics whisking him away to intensive care. Small had suffered a severe hemorrhagic stroke.

“I consider myself very lucky,” says Small, 73, in a phone conversation last week. “My mind and my speech remained intact, but at first I could hardly move my left side.”

Small spent several grueling months in an acute rehab center, where he relearned how to walk and slowly regained partial mobility in his arm and leg.

“One thing my [physical] therapist said when I saw him the first time was that one of the best therapies for recovery from a stroke is playing piano,” says Small. “Musicians and athletes have the best chance of recovering facility after a stroke, because they’ve learned the value of practicing, of repeating over and over, of working toward a common goal and really trying to get inside the problem and exercise and use the mind. This comes down to mind over matter.”

Small’s physical therapist, Bethesda PhysioCare president and owner Jan Dommerholt, grew up playing clarinet and saxophone, which extended into his time in the Dutch military. When Dommerholt started practicing physical therapy, he found himself particularly interested in the problems faced by musicians. He even keeps a piano in his office. (“It’s hard to bring your own piano to therapy sessions,” he tells me.)

Dommerholt says the deeply set muscle and musical memories that musicians rely on to play can actually be a hindrance rather than an asset to their recovery.

“When part of the brain gets knocked out by a stroke, the challenge then is to activate other parts of the brain. Parts of the motor pattern may have been embedded in the part of the brain that no longer works. So part of the challenge for Haskell is to activate other parts of his brain that can take over that function. His old motor patterns are not necessarily helpful because he has no access to them. He has to create new ones.”

The imitative relationship between life and art is at the core of Small’s recovery, though in a more literal way. Dommerholt says one of the key exercises he uses is “mirror therapy,” in which patients focus on a mirror image of the functional hand while trying to move the impaired one — an exercise which essentially tricks the brain into creating new pathways. They’ve also employed “lateralization” therapies to reinforce the distinctions between the left and the right that Small’s brain must relearn.

When they first started working together, Small needed to use his right arm to lift his left onto the keyboard. Dommerholt has been astonished by the rate of Small’s recovery, and expects him to return to two-handed playing within six months to a year.

Small, meanwhile, is operating on a more optimistic schedule. As both fete and fuel for his ongoing recovery, he’s planned a series of recitals built around one-handed repertoire. Titled “A Celebration of Healing,” a pair of Maryland recitals — at Springfield Presbyterian Church in Sykesville on April 10 and Friendship Heights Community Center in Chevy Chase on April 27 — will find Small performing his own arrangements of works including Scarlatti’s [Keyboard Sonata in C Major](#) (K. 159, Longo 104), Schubert’s [Impromptu in G-flat](#) (Op. 90, No. 3), and a transcription of Bach’s [Cello Suite No. 6](#), inspired by the “tiny bit of cello” Small plays.

Small says the musical conversation within the Scarlatti piece was something he could just manage with one hand, preserving its virtuosity while necessarily excising some notes. He describes the process of learning Schubert for one hand as "revelatory" for the reintroduction it gave him to the architecture of the Impromptu — a guided tour of the composer's mind.

He'll also perform a new composition, "Diary of a Stroke: The Adventures of Herb and Pete," titled after the pet names Small bestowed upon his left leg and hand, respectively. It bears mentioning here that the pianist's approach to rehab owes just as much to his sense of humor as to his natural disposition toward discipline.

The 17-minute arc of "Diary" blooms from an angular, heavily pedaled, seven-note figure that seems to be trying to remember itself. It searches and branches out, occasionally distracting with a nostalgic melody that passes like the outline of an unrelated memory. Small says he was trying to re-create the mood and fatigue that immediately followed the stroke. Indeed, its shape feels neural.

The piece becomes an expression of the grueling work of rehab — learning to walk again, falls and all. A section he refers to as "Dance of the Neurons" is an homage to neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to rewire itself when portions of it are damaged. (On April 17, Washington Metropolitan Philharmonic Association will rebroadcast a recent performance of "Diary of a Stroke" [on its website](#).)

Small has [taught piano and composition](#) at [Washington Conservatory of Music](#) since the school's inception in 1984, and is a former chair of its piano department. He received his own training at San Francisco Conservatory and Carnegie Mellon, studied composition with [Vincent Persichetti](#) and piano with [William Masselos](#) and the great [Leon Fleisher](#) — who, in 1964, lost use of his right hand as a result of focal dystonia, a rare neurological condition that can cause involuntary contractions and "abnormal postures." (Fleisher died in Baltimore at the age of 92 in 2020.)

[Leon Fleisher, sublime pianist undaunted by mysterious hand malady, dies at 92](#)

In many ways, the stroke and the demands of recovery have turned Small back into a student. Dommerholt even says that learning new work might be easier for the pianist than attempting to revisit works he once knew most closely.

Small has thus charted a course forward mapped to repertoire. After the run of one-handed concerts, he's already got his first two-handed recital on the books for July 10 at WMPA's summer chamber series at the [Lyceum](#) in Alexandria.

But his ultimate goal is the one he had before any of this even happened. For a long time, Small has had a bucket-list desire to perform Beethoven's famously challenging Diabelli Variations.

“The Diabelli to me is much more than music,” he says. “To me, it’s a religious experience.”

Small’s sporadic pre-stroke visitations to the Variations have, in the past few months, tightened into regular rehearsals. For inspiration, he looks back to the tenacity of Fleisher, but also to contemporaries like [Anton Kuerti](#) and [Stephen Kovacevich](#), both pianists who suffered near-fatal strokes — Kuerti’s onstage during a [2013 concert in Miami](#) — and both of whom went on to full recoveries, including performances of the Diabelli Variations.

Small has his mental calendar marked for a performance of the Variations in the 2023-2024 season, with Pete and Herb in full cooperation. And while a “modicum of reality” is always there to temper his optimism, Small says the seeming impossibility of his goal is what has made it a “life saver.”

“I think without this kind of a goal, it would be real easy to lapse into a kind of depression or incapacity,” he says. “The worst that can happen is that it may not.”

Haskell Small’s “A Celebration of Healing” comes to Springfield Presbyterian Church in Sykesville as part of the SPC Concert Series on April 10, and Friendship Heights Community Center in Chevy Chase on April 27. Visit springfieldchurchmd.com and friendshipheightsmd.gov for more information.