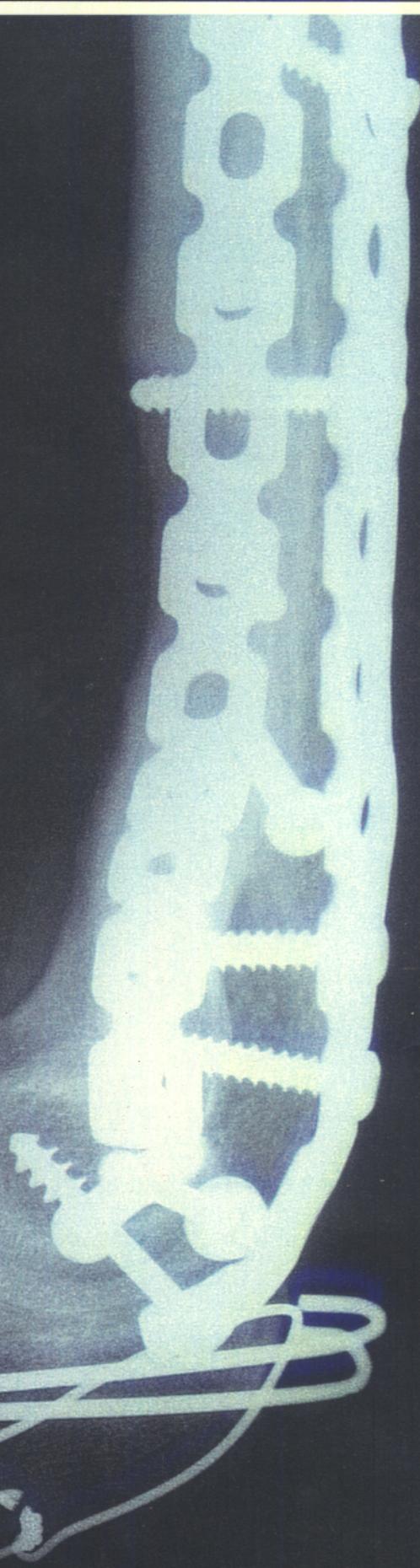


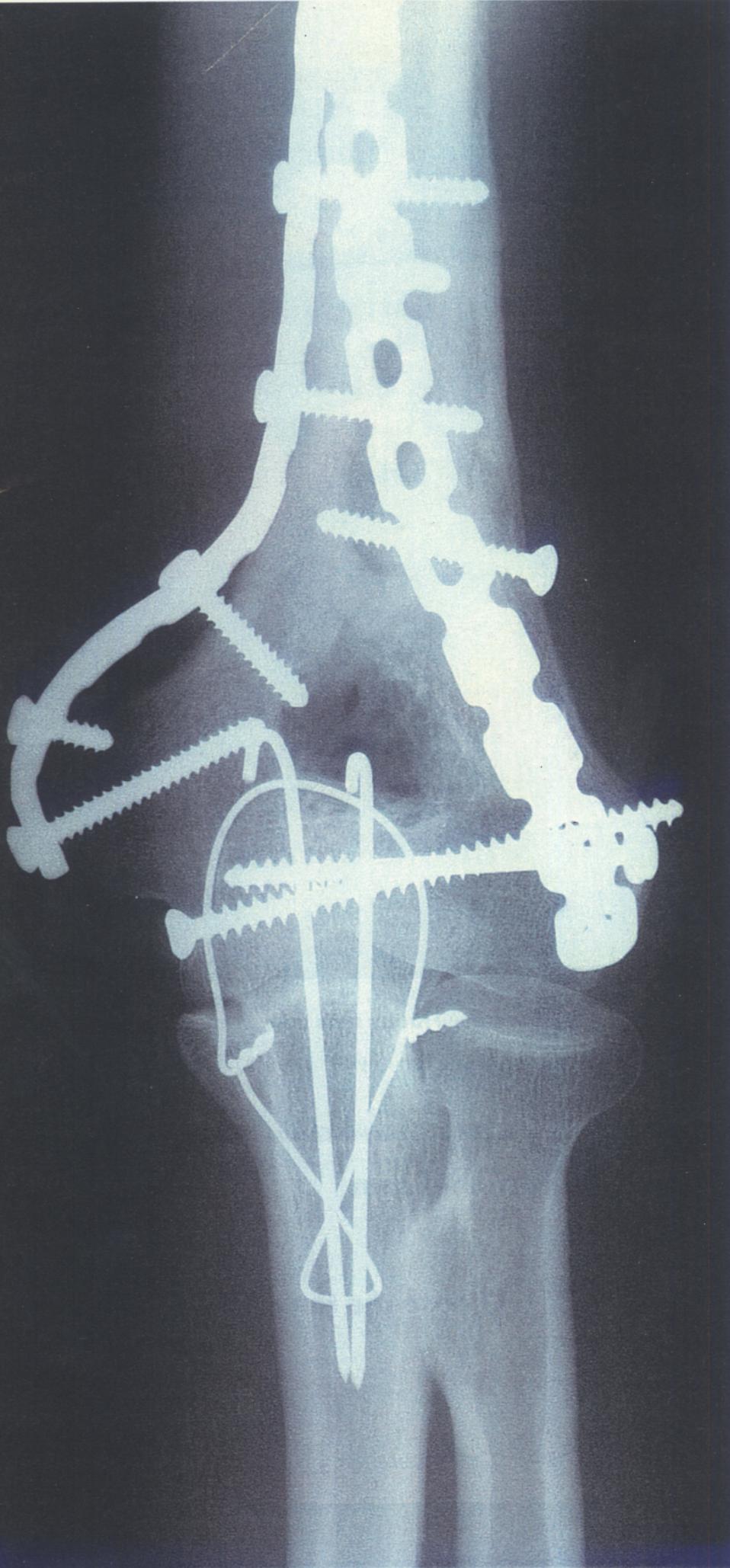
WIRED FOR SOUND

He was a virtuoso pianist until his arm was mangled in a car crash — and few thought he would play again. So after surgeons rebuilt his limb, how did Jack Gibbons reclaim his place on the world stage? By Andrew Morgan



Front- and side-view x-rays of Jack Gibbons's arm, showing the plates and wires used to rebuild the limb after his near-fatal crash. Above: Gibbons in concert at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall before the accident





O

n a chill autumn evening last November, Jack Gibbons made his way to the spacious Manhattan apartment of Liza Minnelli, who was celebrating her engagement to her manager, David Gest. The door opened and, although they had not met before, Minnelli threw her arms around Gibbons and ushered him in.

Gibbons, a virtuoso pianist from Oxfordshire, had been invited because he is considered the world's greatest interpreter of George Gershwin's music. He is huge in the United States, where he is described as a genius, and his face towers on Broadway billboards when he plays New York and fills Carnegie Hall. He has published four volumes of solo Gershwin recordings, which sell like hot cakes, mixing show tunes such as *Swanee*, *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off* and *Fascinating Rhythm* with the more classical *Porgy and Bess* and *An American in Paris*. Gibbons is the only virtuoso who performs Gershwin's original improvisations on tunes like *I Got Rhythm*. They were never published but Gibbons painstakingly reconstructed them after listening to the maestro's original 78rpm recordings and piano rolls.

For the Minnelli gathering, he was part of the entertainment, alongside Tony Bennett and Gloria Gaynor, who sang *I Will Survive*. The party took place a few weeks after the attack on the twin towers, so the song had a particular resonance for the New Yorkers present. It was even more poignant for Gibbons because it was a miracle he was alive, let alone playing for this showbiz crowd.

As he thundered through *Rhapsody in Blue*, few present knew Gibbons was a walking sculpture of metal pins, plates and wire, which had been engineered into his left arm and across his face following a head-on car crash near Banbury the previous March. "It was very surreal and I thought that I had, indeed, died and this was some post-death fantasy," he says. "I wouldn't have been surprised if George himself had walked in."

In fact, there is so much metal in his body that he carries photos of his x-rays with him, so he can explain to airport security guards why their

Right: Gibbons at home in Oxfordshire, where he learnt to play again after the crash. Below: the wreckage of his car after the accident last year

alarms ring so loudly when he passes through.

The accident took place around five in the morning, when Gibbons, almost home after a long journey from Wales, ploughed into a builder's van, crushing his car to half its normal length. He still can recall nothing of the collision. He was rushed to the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford, his life in the balance. The injuries pulped his face, with his eye sockets so badly smashed that his eyeballs lolled about. Bones were broken in his cheek and upper jaw, and his face had to be reconstructed using seven metal plates, but his nose remained intact. He suffered a collapsed left lung and a fractured sternum, while injuries to his abdomen were severe. His spleen was removed and both his feet were broken.

Amazingly, his teeth, which had always been crooked, escaped damage. "I wouldn't have minded losing them and getting a new set, given all the other injuries," he says, his smile still as infectious as ever.

However, the most daunting injuries were to his upper left arm and elbow, which was broken in about 15 places and had to be rebuilt. Philip Wilde, a consultant trauma surgeon, performed initial surgery on his elbow, while other teams concentrated on other injuries. "He was within a millimetre of severing the main nerve supplying the hand, which would have meant him losing the use of his fingers to play the piano – and the end of his career," Wilde recalls.

It would have been curtains for a remarkable talent. As well as Gershwin, Gibbons is a seasoned classical virtuoso who plays Bach, Chopin, Liszt, Debussy and Beethoven. He is also a champion of Chopin's contemporary, the Parisian Charles Valentin-Alkan (1813–88), whose work is technically demanding. Gibbons gave the marathon London premiere of his *Douze Etudes*, which lasts for three hours. A critic said one Alkan recording "ranks among the most exhilarating pianism I've heard on disc". Although he plays concertos with orchestras such as the Royal Philharmonic, Gibbons prefers one-man shows, chatting to the audience as an antidote to the usual restrained image of classical music.

For Gibbons, lying in a trauma unit at the age of 39 had a peculiar irony, because Gershwin died from a brain tumour at 38, and another hero, Frédéric Chopin, succumbed to tuberculosis at 39. Gibbons used to joke he hoped he made 40.

In fact, he not only reached his 40th birthday last March, but celebrated it with a programme of his favourite pieces at Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre, raising £10,000 for the John Radcliffe hospital's Critical Care Initiative. Unable to talk in intensive care, he had promised the concert in a written note to his face surgeon before going to theatre, long before he knew he would recover. As well as family, friends, nurses and other hospital staff, surgeons from five departments who had saved his life attended the emotional occasion.



Several people came from the US, including Tony Stepanski, a businessman who sponsors Gibbons's New York concerts. Tony's son, Matt, also present, was late for work on September 11 at his World Trade Center office, which took a direct hit from one of the aircraft.

After leaving hospital, Gibbons had convalesced at his home in the village of Duns Tew, which he shares with his wife, Diana Sainsbury, who also has had a career in music. A microbiologist with several books to her credit, she played flamenco guitar alongside the virtuoso Paco Peña before meeting Gibbons and becoming his promotional

thought this deficiency, even if his bones healed, would prove the end of his career.

Gibbons had anticipated plunging into depression at the loss of a God-given talent that has seen him play to audiences around the world. However, he was philosophical about his injuries and claims he told himself he would simply take up another career. "I was struggling to shave in the morning, so playing the piano did not seem too important at the time." Gradually, though, his sense of tone began to improve.

Gibbons, in a wheelchair, sat at his grand piano at home and tried to play again. To restore



'He was within a millimetre of severing a main nerve and losing the use of his fingers'

manager. The crash and its aftermath were so traumatic that she still prefers not to discuss it.

When Gibbons could not play in the early stages of recovery, he composed classical songs in his wheelchair for the first time in 20 years since his student days at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. It proved fruitful, and the songs are expected to be performed in the US later this year. Inevitably, the subjects are loss and regret.

His bones started healing, but after a few weeks another crisis overtook him when he suffered acute stomach pains and was again rushed to hospital, where doctors found that the accident had aggravated a genetic defect in his intestines; a large part of his colon was removed.

Disconcertingly, Gibbons found that the crash had impaired his hearing, probably as a result of dried blood inside his skull. Even music played in harmony sounded distorted to him and he

strength, he played Bach preludes and fugues, but the Gershwin passages were too tough. As well as needing force and stamina, they require large stretches for chords and intricate work with the left hand, as the composer's hands were so large.

As well as repairing muscles and nerves, his body had to relearn instructions. His fingers would not obey the brain's orders, so he would try to put down his middle finger and another one went down instead – hardly good news for somebody used to playing at the Lincoln Center, one of New York's grandest recital halls. He worked at exercises for days on end and gradually regained some control, but any thought of concerts was a long way off.

Gibbons had not taken out any insurance against being forced to stop working. His earnings had kept him and Diana, and suddenly they were zero, with all performances cancelled. He had ➤ 33

PREVIOUS PAGES: X-RAYS; COURTESY OF JOHN RADCLIFFE HOSPITAL, OXFORD. INSET: JONATHAN OLLEY/NEA/RETNA; TOP: JONATHAN OLLEY/NEA/RETNA; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF JACK GIBBONS

never donated to the Musicians Benevolent Fund, but officials visited him and provided enough money to pay the mortgage, as well as living expenses. "They were quite astonishing, I've never known anything like it," recalls Gibbons, who will now give a benefit concert for the organisation.

In May last year, he made his first foray into an Oxford concert hall, in his wheelchair. As his left hand was not working, he arranged some Chopin and Bach for his right hand alone. For someone used to giving animated performances, it was far from enjoyable, but it brought the house down.

Later, out of his wheelchair but still finding it hard climbing stairs onto the stage, he played Gershwin for music teachers at Oxford's Jacqueline du Pré Music Building. It went better than expected, although he cheated in some passages, as his left hand still could not stretch.

For someone usually so relaxed in front of an audience, he had lost his confidence performing and did not feel comfortable, unsure if his hands would stand up to the strain of playing.

Last November, though, his biggest test came at New York's Carnegie Hall, again an all-Gershwin programme. It was draining but went well and, after playing for Liza Minnelli, he embarked on a short American tour.

Even then, though, he struggled to play how he wanted, and it was his 40th birthday concert – virtually on the anniversary of the crash – before he felt the clouds lift. "Playing in front of all

my surgeons and nurses, that's when I realised this is amazing, doing again what I have always done, but only thanks to them."

The consultant trauma surgeon Philip Wilde recalls: "It was a fabulous concert. It was great that we were able to get him back to full fitness, and we were delighted that his body had returned to the demands of playing. I felt proud for the team.

"But he put in a lot of work himself. His attitude has always been positive, and that's very



'After surviving an accident like this, you think, "Who cares about the future?"'

important. A lot of the credit goes to him for the way he coped with the situation."

Gibbons has lost weight, and his nose, now slightly bent, gives him problems with breathing. At times he can feel the plates in his face, and he will have to take penicillin every day for the rest of his life. "It's changed my outlook. I'm far less worried than before. Once you've survived an accident like that, you think, 'Who cares about the future and what's round the corner?'"

Indeed, he quotes his hero, the Italian pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, considered the

most flawless pianist of the 20th century, who was in the Italian air force and then worked in the resistance. After fighting in the war, he said nothing troubled him too much, apart from the piano not being properly tuned.

Now, Gibbons wants to pursue more goals, such as working even more in the US, where his audiences are so enthusiastic. "I was coasting before, and moaning at the same time, like many in the arts. There are many things I want to do.

Before, I was afraid of making big decisions in case they didn't work out. Now I think, 'Why worry?'"

He has not driven since the crash. Occasionally he stays with his parents in Oxford while working, or travels on buses – making him a passionate campaigner for saving local transport services.

His next big London concert is his Gershwin Party at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall next Sunday, when his talent should be in full swing. "I appreciate playing the piano more than ever. As the years go on, I'll realise more and more just how lucky I was that night." ■

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