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# Bush defends secret wiretaps

By Richard B. Schmitt and Mary Curtius  
Tribune Newspapers

WASHINGTON — President Bush, facing fresh criticism about how he has waged the war on terror, acknowledged Saturday that he authorized a secret eavesdropping program in the

U.S. after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, saying the program was vital to saving American lives.

Bush, in an unusual live radio broadcast from the White House, detailed what he described as a “highly classified” program to root out terrorists. He defended the spy program as legal and declared he has no in-

tentions of stopping it.

“In the weeks following the terrorist attacks on our nation, I authorized the National Security Agency, consistent with U.S. law and the Constitution, to intercept the international communications of people with known links to Al Qaeda and related terrorist organizations,”

Bush said.

“Its purpose is to detect and prevent terrorist attacks against the United States, our friends and allies,” he said.

He said that top officials at the Justice Department and the National Security Agency regularly reviewed the program and that he had personally signed

off on re-authorizations of surveillance activities more than 30 times.

But questions mounted about the legality of the program, and some members of Congress said the plan was an abuse of power.

Bush’s acknowledgment that he authorized the wiretaps was a “shocking admission,” said

Sen. Russ Feingold (D-Wis).

“The president does not get to pick and choose which laws he wants to follow. He is a president, not a king,” Feingold said.

Bush said his authority to approve what he called a “vital tool in our war against the ter-

PLEASE SEE **BUSH**, PAGE 15

A STORY IN THREE PARTS

## STRICKEN GENIUS



Before five strokes left him unable to walk or talk, Alexei Sultanov had attained international fame, winning the Van Cliburn piano competition at 19.

## The life and rebirth of a musical mastermind

Story by Howard Reich | Photos by Zbigniew Bzdak

The pianist lay unconscious in his hospital bed, bandages wrapped around his freshly shaved skull. Just days earlier, he could achieve astonishing feats at the keyboard, his hands often disappearing into a blur of energy, his body rising from the piano bench as he unleashed salvos of sound.

Before doctors cut into his head, he was a virtuoso. Audiences marveled at his speed, his strength, his ability to thunder at the keys. A Soviet-trained prodigy, Alexei Sultanov won the gold medal at the prestigious Van Cliburn International Piano Competition at 19, the youngest in history to do so. Like a rock star, with a mane of unruly hair, he played to hysterical fans across Europe and the Far East.

Now, more than a decade later, a web of tubes and wires flowed from his tiny frame, keeping him alive in the intensive care unit of a Ft. Worth hospital.

If he were awake, Sultanov would not be surprised to find himself tethered to machines in a hospital room. He had spent much of his childhood in quarters like this, doctors ministering to the cuts and bruises he repeatedly inflicted on the same dexterous hands that would win him worldwide acclaim.

But this was different. In the earliest hours of Feb. 27, 2001, five strokes swept through his brain, deadening the left side of his body, blinding his left eye and rendering him mute. For hours after surgery, Sultanov’s wife, Dace, won-

dered whether her husband would survive.

Then, in the midst of the hospital room’s stillness, she noticed a twitch in his fingers. At first the gestures seemed random—a forefinger trembling, a pinky fluttering, a thumb quavering, to no apparent purpose.

Finally a pattern emerged. The unconscious pianist appeared to be fingering a keyboard.

On a hunch, his wife brought a tape deck to Sultanov’s hospital room the next day and softly played his own recording of Schubert’s Impromptu in A-Flat. Immediately, his right hand again began phrasing strands of melody in thin air.

This haunting gesture left his wife to wonder whether his music would be entombed in his nearly motionless body, whether the small but muscular fingers that once had shaped scores of Beethoven and Brahms might ever play a simple tune again.

Or whether he even would want to.

PLEASE SEE **SULTANOV**, PAGE 20

### MORE ONLINE



Dallas Morning News photo by Beatriz Terrazas

Read the Chicago Tribune’s report of Alexei Sultanov’s journey at [chicagotribune.com/piano](http://chicagotribune.com/piano)

**SEE:** Sultanov’s performances.  
**HEAR:** Sultanov’s recordings.  
**CONTRIBUTE:** To a message board.



Photo for the Tribune by Erik S. Lesser  
**Bob Green of Selma, Ala., is ready for Santa duty.**

## And here comes Santa Claus – straight from the salon

By Dahleen Glanton  
Tribune national correspondent

ROSSELL, Ga.—They come to Joyce Beisel’s salon as regular men with plump bellies and long, stringy hair. But in four to eight hours, she transforms

them into their fantasy—a jolly white-haired Santa ready to ascend a gilded throne at a shopping mall or to hand out gifts at a Christmas party.

For 30 years, Santas have traveled from all over the country, and perhaps as far as the North

Pole, to sit in Beisel’s swivel chair and let her work her magic with a concoction of bleach and dye, scissors and a blow-dryer. It is a complicated, time-consuming process, but Beisel has it down to a science, giving each Santa, and sometimes Mrs.

Claus, a treatment that makes them appear authentic.

For these men, and thousands of others around the country, being Santa Claus is not just a seasonal job. It is a lifestyle.

PLEASE SEE **SANTA**, PAGE 13

## Ex-chair of hospital board had dual roles

He was consultant for firm on whose projects he voted

By David Kidwell  
Tribune staff reporter

The former chairman of the state hospital board voted for construction projects financed by Bear, Stearns & Co. while he was quietly receiving more than \$1 million in finder’s fees from the firm for unrelated business, a Tribune investigation has found.

Thomas P. Beck’s dual role as both a paid consultant to the firm and a public servant overseeing projects it financed raises questions about his long-standing financial ties, never before fully disclosed.

Beck’s attorney said he followed the law, and there is no connection between his consulting work and his public service.

Officials at two public pension funds that do business with Bear Stearns initially said they had no records of a 15-year-old consulting deal Beck had with the bond firm, but supplied the documents after repeated Tribune requests.

Following the newspaper’s inquiries, one of the pension funds asked Bear Stearns to end Beck’s payments. It did.

The revelations come at a particularly sensitive time for both the company and the Illinois Hospital Facilities Planning Board chaired by Beck until last year.

In May, another hospital board member and Bear Stearns’ former Chicago managing director were indicted in an alleged scheme to buy influence at the board, which approves all major hospital construction.

Beck, 66, a longtime Democrat and former Cook County comptroller, was not implicated in the indictment.

Beck’s attorney said the payments Beck receives from Bear Stearns are completely unrelated to his role on the hospital board and that he made all the

PLEASE SEE **PENSION**, PAGE 17

### CHICAGO TRIBUNE HOLIDAY GIVING

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# STRICKEN GENIUS



At the Moscow Conservatory, where Alexei Sultanov and his future wife, Dace, enrolled in 1986, students warm up before final exams in June.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

## GENIUS IN ITS INFANCY

Alexei Sultanov was barely 6 months old when he began striking the keys of an upright piano parked inches from his crib in his parents' three-room apartment in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, then a Soviet republic.

Not long after, when his mother sang a tune to him, Sultanov hummed it back to her flawlessly.

"I was in shock," recalled his mother, Natalia Sultanov, seated last summer in the family's cramped Moscow apartment, a 5-foot-high banner from her son's 1990 Carnegie Hall debut dominating the living room.

"At that moment, I said: 'We are doomed. We are destined to be slaves of this child the rest of our lives.'"

A professional violinist, Natalia Sultanov instantly recognized her son's gift, which each day became more apparent to her and husband Faizul, a concert cellist.

By age 2, before Alexei could talk, he played exquisite melodies on that Soviet-brand Red October keyboard, astonishing family and friends. Sultanov's ear was so keen to the nuances of music that he would cry when he heard a sad, minor-key melody unfold on the radio or in the park near their apartment.

"It broke your heart," recalled Natalia Sultanov, who often paid street musicians to stop playing—or at least to change keys—to calm her hypersensitive son.

Though his mother envisioned him as the next Jascha Heifetz and tried to teach him on a tiny violin, he objected violently.

"I smashed the violin on the floor," he once remembered. "Then they allowed me to start piano lessons." His parents taught him the basics when he was 3.

Two years later, he was composing music and transcribing works of Beethoven onto score paper simply by listening. His precocity easily earned him a berth studying with Tashkent's most celebrated piano teacher, Tamara Popovich. Even she was stunned at the scope of his talents.

"He already could hear perfectly, he could sing perfectly," recalled Popovich, speaking from Tashkent by phone.

At 7 he startled Tashkent's listening public in a virtuoso performance of Mozart's Concert Rondo in D Major with a symphony orchestra. His parents' private recording of Sultanov's debut in May 1977 reveals a prodigy of Mozartean brilliance, the melting lyricism of his touch, the serene maturity of his phrasings and the sparkle of his technique surely the despair of students twice his age.

Though his parents were so poor they slept on a bare mattress on the floor, they had scraped together enough cash to purchase a camera and a tape recorder so they could document this performance—and every subsequent step of their son's ascension.

Sultanov's musical prowess awed his mother, but she feared it could spawn dangerous jealousy in others.

"I felt an emotion like I would want to grab my son and run away with him," said Natalia Sultanov, "so no one will do any harm to him."

As often happens with prodigies of incalculable potential, music soon overwhelmed Sultanov's childhood.

To prevent him from wasting a moment, his mother brought meals to him at the keyboard.

Persuaded by Popovich that only a ferocious work ethic would serve genius of this caliber, his parents sometimes imposed a harsh discipline upon their child. "With Alexei, his mother hit with the shoe," said Faizul, Sultanov's father. "Sometimes Alexei joked, 'I need the shoe—I've got to practice.'"

Natalia Sultanov believed there was so much love and warmth in the family that a blow from a shoe made scant difference, yet she agonized over her son's childhood.

"On the one hand, I wanted to take pity on him," his mother said. "One hundred times I wanted to say, 'Let him go and enjoy his childhood.'"

"But tomorrow there is a lesson."

Sultanov's skills developed at a seemingly miraculous pace, enabling him to perform Beethoven's towering First Piano Concerto when he was 9—akin to playing major-league baseball as a teen.

But he also began injuring himself. He frequently came home with cuts and bruises on his hands, in effect wounding the tools of his own genius and sabotaging his musical progress.

"When he would be in the emergency room," recalled his mother, "they would say, 'Here is Alexei again.'"

As a child he also developed a habit of retreating to the bathroom to purge food, his father said. Sultanov's parents presumed he did this when he overate. They did not attribute his bulimia to any other factors. But it would continue to plague him.

Though summers are a time of relaxation for most children, for Sultanov they were even more grueling than the rest of the year. From 1984-86, the teenaged Sultanov spent the hot months in the Moscow-area apartment of his aunt Svetlana Volodarsky, with teacher Popovich at his side in a tiny rehearsal space morning, noon and night.

Whenever Popovich was not present, Sultanov entertained himself by improvising jazz, reveling in the freedom of this music, recalled Nargisa Makhamova, his cousin.

But the rigorous classical methods that Popovich imposed



Alexei Sultanov, at 7 months, strikes the keys of an upright piano parked inches from his crib.



Sultanov, at 12, studied with Tashkent's most celebrated piano teacher, Tamara Popovich.



Sultanov wins the Van Cliburn competition in 1989.



Dace and Alexei Sultanov, whose love began on a rooftop, married in Ft. Worth in 1990.

paid off. At 15, Sultanov was accepted for study at the vaunted Moscow Central Music School, a training ground for the world-famous Moscow Conservatory.

It was there that Sultanov met his future wife, a Latvian cello student named Dace Abele, in a terrifying moment that linked them immutably.

## IN THE GRIP OF ROMANCE

On the rainy afternoon of April 20, 1986, several music students converged at the conservatory's Bolshoi Hall to try to catch a glimpse of legendary concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz, who was playing in Russia for the first time since fleeing communism for the West in the 1920s. Among Horowitz's gathering acolytes were Sultanov and Dace (pronounced DAH-tsye).

Because tickets were costly and scarce, the students knew they couldn't get in to hear the concert—at least not through the front door. So Sultanov persuaded the group to follow him up a ladder attached to an adjoining building, then leap onto the top of the conservatory. From there, they could sneak in a door and watch Horowitz illicitly from the rafters.

After Sultanov landed successfully on the roof, the others followed. But in the afternoon's drizzle, Dace—a small, blond beauty—lost her footing on the conservatory's slippery and slanted roof. She believed she was going to plunge to her death.

Sultanov used his small yet inordinately powerful hands to save her, wrapping one of his palms around a roof antenna and offering the other to her.

"Alexei sees me sliding down, and he reacted," recalled Dace. "Later on, he explains to everybody, 'I grabbed the nearest antenna. I grabbed the girl. I looked at the girl. It's not bad, I save the girl.'"

The two—initially bound by Sultanov's grip—soon were inseparable, cutting classes to stroll through Moscow's parks, playing duets by Chopin and Saint-Saens in rehearsal rooms, forging a relationship far from the purview of either's parents.

But the solace Sultanov found with Dace did not resolve his ambivalence about making music. At the Moscow Conservatory, where the two of them enrolled in the autumn of 1986, he became increasingly rebellious.

"It was very difficult to impose discipline on him," said celebrated piano teacher Lev Naumov, speaking in his Moscow apartment. "He broke a drum [belonging to the school] that was very expensive."

"He played pieces of music that were not very good for the direction of the conservatory," added Naumov, referring to repertoire considered unworthy of the great Russian tradition.

The pressure on Sultanov only increased, for now he was wholly immersed in the Soviet system, which pushed its most promising pianists relentlessly. Sultanov and his peers endured endless rounds of local, regional and national contests in an assembly-line process designed to produce battle-worthy contenders for international piano competitions.

At once driven to compete yet compelled to destroy the very instruments of his success—his hands—he briefly succeeded in bucking the system.

In the midst of competing in the Tchaikovsky International Competition in Moscow in July 1986, he bashed his right hand into a wall, perhaps unleashing years of pent-up rage. The impact shattered his pinky finger.

"I just left him for half an hour—when I came back, he shows me the hand," said Natalia Sultanov, who had gone to Moscow for the event. "The fingers are swollen and blue."

The fracture forced him out of contention. To avoid the wrath of his parents and teachers, Sultanov claimed at the time that the injury was the fault of the piano, its lid inopportunistically falling on his hand.

His mother tried to convince herself that was what happened, and to this day she cannot speak about what really took place.

"It's easier for me to believe it's the lid and not be tortured by other thoughts," she said.

His parents decided that Sultanov wasn't working hard enough at the conservatory outside their supervision. So they moved from Tashkent to the Moscow area in 1988 to encourage him to prepare for the biggest performance of his career.

## ‘THE AUDIENCE LOVED ME’

Thirty-eight of the world's most skilled young pianists convened in Ft. Worth in 1989 to compete for a shot at glory: the gold medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition and the hundreds of thousands of dollars in concert engagements that come with it.

But none was equipped to take on the 5-foot-3-inch, 107-pound teenager representing the Soviet Union. Alexei Sultanov assaulted the keyboard with cyclonic fury, the Steinway grand shuddering under his attacks.

Performing as if he intended to conquer the piano rather than play it, Sultanov jolted the audience with break-neck tempos and roaring crescendos. He pushed his art so close to the brink of frenzy that the crowd fell into a startled silence.

During Liszt's "Mephisto" Waltz, the pianist's two-fisted chords and galvanic bass notes severed a pair of the instrument's metallic strings.

"When I finished playing the finals, I was almost sure I had won," Sultanov told the Tribune shortly after claiming the gold medal. "I think the audience loved me."

The victory catapulted Sultanov to the high life. He schmoozed on air with Johnny Carson and David Letterman, played Carnegie Hall in New York, and basked in his celebrity in



# STRICKEN GENIUS



Pictures of Alexei Sultanov as a child surround his mother, Natalia. A professional violinist, Natalia Sultanov instantly recognized her son's gift.

## Sultanov's musical prowess awed his mother, but she feared it could spawn dangerous jealousy in others

the gilded concert halls of Europe.

On tour, fans treated the glamorous pianist—who grew his hair to shoulder length—like a sex symbol. Women tossed panties and hotel-room keys onto the stage, according to Sultanov's friends. But the musician remained smitten with Dace, whom he married in Ft. Worth in 1990.

In off hours, he amused himself bungee jumping off cliffs and riding roller coasters, playing video games at all hours of the night, as if he were making up for childhood diversions he missed.

### ONE FALSE NOTE

Flying home from a concert tour in 1991, Sultanov felt sharp pains in his abdomen. When he arrived in Ft. Worth, he was rushed to a hospital, where he had his appendix removed.

The event rattled him, said Dace, and he became increasingly concerned with a growing list of ailments, including upset stomach, irritable bowel syndrome, spastic colon, bulimia and congenital hypertension. Because several relatives had strokes, he feared the same fate awaited him.

He began carrying a blood-pressure kit on his travels, constantly monitoring his levels. By reading voraciously on his medical conditions, he learned that a stroke can occur in an instant, when blood supply to the brain suddenly is interrupted.

He had other worries, prompted by a stalled career: In a single year after winning the Cliburn, Sultanov played 45 concerts. Within a few years, he was performing a mere half dozen. The next wave of Cliburn contest winners was seizing the spotlight, the concert engagements, the record deals.

So in 1995, he traveled to Warsaw to enter the Frederic Chopin International Piano Competition, the second-most important contest in Europe after the Tchaikovsky in Moscow (where he had broken his finger nearly a decade earlier).

"I wanted to make a little splash in my artistic life and show people I'm still alive," Sultanov said at the time.

In Warsaw, Sultanov sounded transformed. The Herculean performer whose assaults had pulverized piano strings at the Cliburn in 1989 showed new sensitivity and introspection. The teenager who crashed and burned his way through his repertoire in Ft. Worth now found expressive phrases and a lyric touch in Chopin's B Minor Sonata in Warsaw.

Sultanov had matured. The passing years and the struggles of his life after the Cliburn competition deepened his views of music and art.

But this time, Sultanov did not take the gold. The Chopin jury declined to award a first prize—only the second time that happened since the competition began in 1927. Instead, Sultanov and the French pianist Philippe Giusiano shared second place, while Sultanov also received an "audience favorite" plaque.

Sultanov was despondent, convinced that he deserved the highest honor, said his wife. After the results were announced, a sullen Sultanov told an Associated Press reporter who approached him for comment to "leave me alone."

The pianist brooded for months over what he considered defeat and humiliation. He would no longer travel outside of Ft. Worth without his wife, and his resentment at the stressful nature of his childhood boiled over.

He frequently placed long-distance phone calls from Ft. Worth to his parents in Moscow, where he had bought them an apartment, to ask why they had made his childhood a torment.

"When he is in his late 20s, it all came out," his wife said. "He told his parents: 'Why did you do this to me?'"

The Sultanovs remember these calls but do not consider them particularly significant.

"Maybe this is how a human being is designed," said his mother. "He recalls those bad moments, but not the rest of the happiness."

His anxieties, though, were about to worsen. On April 2, 1996, Sultanov—elegantly garbed in white tie and tails—stepped onto the stage of Tokyo's Kioi Hall and prepared to play a piece he had performed uncounted times before.

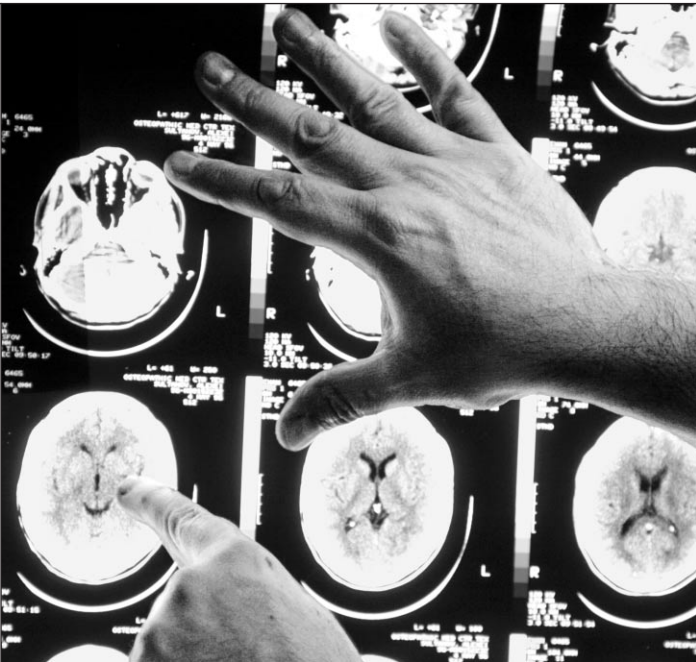
His fingers began to trace the slow, descending, F-minor chord that ominously opens Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, before the piece erupts into a shock of running notes.

Sultanov's right hand raced to the top of the keyboard, as Beethoven's score requires. But as his fingers approached the climax of the running phrase, his pinky landed on a wrong note—a few decibels in a storm of sound. No casual listener could have detected it amid the thunderclaps Sultanov produced at the piano; not even a seasoned musician could have realized that Sultanov hit a fleeting high C instead of the B-flat a centimeter away.

But Sultanov knew the minuscule misstep signaled disaster.

After completing the "Appassionata" to clamorous applause, he walked backstage and told Dace: "I think I had a stroke. I thought my hand froze for a split second. It was not even a split second. It was quick—like that."

Sultanov hastened to see physicians. He insisted he had suffered a stroke, but no one believed him.



Dr. Ed Kramer, Sultanov's neurologist, shows an MRI view of the pianist's brain after his 1996 mini-stroke.

A few weeks later, Dr. Ed Kramer, a Ft. Worth neurologist, studied a batch of Sultanov brain scans and noticed something that everyone else had missed: a pin-prick-sized black spot in a sea of gray. That dot, Kramer concluded, indicated where a speck of brain tissue had died after a tiny blood vessel or vessels had collapsed or clotted.

Kramer observed that Sultanov suffered from low-grade diastolic hypertension, meaning that his blood pressure was too high when his heart was between beats. The doctor told the pianist that his self-diagnosis was correct.

During the stress of performing in Tokyo, said Kramer, Sultanov likely had experienced the small stroke.

But the doctor was optimistic his new patient would rebound quickly, and soon Sultanov was playing as nimbly as ever.

Yet he became obsessed with his physical condition, researching medical articles on the Internet and typing on the computer his own detailed analyses of why his body was fighting him.

"The pressure in your brain will affect your emotional and mental status," he wrote on April 27, 1996. "Your veins and the rest of the blood vessels also will be strained ... [which] makes you experience miserable and horrifying feelings."

Sultanov feared the worst.

As his tension built, he tried to revive his career. In the late 1990s, his bookings thinned, and his wife took over as his manager.

Then Sultanov saw another opportunity. The Tchaikovsky International Competition, the most prestigious piano contest in the world, was scheduled for the spring of 1998 in Moscow. It attracted the best young performers in classical music, and Sultanov, now 28, felt ready for battle.

His contest performances inspired the usual raucous ovations. The audience and the media quickly anointed Sultanov the favorite, but the jury split dramatically. The combination of extremely high and low marks gave Sultanov a score that prevented him from even making the finals. Newspapers called the decision a "scandal."

"He was thrown over—it was not by chance," said Naumov, the Moscow piano professor who served on that Tchaikovsky jury. He contended that some members of the panel intentionally low-balled his former student's scores to counteract the high ones.

Sultanov reeled from this latest setback, refusing to attend the awards ceremony and sinking further into despair.

When the pianist returned to Moscow to play a recital in 2000, he looked as if he were at the brink of exhaustion.

"He had white skin and black circles around his eyes," recalled his only brother, Sergey. "And his hands trembled."

### A STORM IN THE BRAIN

On a February evening in 2001, Sultanov walked into the bathroom in the Ft. Worth home he shared with his wife, leaned over the toilet and purged his dinner.

A few minutes earlier, he had eaten a crock of French onion soup that he had cooked, promising himself he would not eat the cheese because he was lactose intolerant.

But he couldn't resist its aroma and taste. After he devoured the food, his stomach began to ache, causing waves of nausea.

He decided to do what he had done since childhood—retreat to

the bathroom to empty himself of his meal. But while doing so he became dizzy, lost his balance and struck the left side of his head against the porcelain sink.

When he came out of the restroom, his wife noticed a little bump on his head.

"Alosha, what's wrong?" she asked, using his nickname.

Sultanov told her about his accident, and the two thought nothing of the small injury.

Over the next several days, though, he grew weaker and finally could not move his right hand or write his name. His wife phoned Dr. Kramer, the Ft. Worth neurologist who had diagnosed Sultanov's mini-stroke in 1996, and Kramer ordered him to the emergency room.

En route, on Feb. 26, 2001, the Sultanovs stopped at Kramer's office.

"He looked ashen, pallid, tremulous, sick," recalled Kramer. "He was trying to keep a positive attitude, but you could see his [right] hand was uncoordinated."

At the hospital, a CT scan revealed that blood was pooling in Sultanov's head, beneath the outermost membrane enveloping his brain. It gathered from the top of his cranium down to ear level, placing pressure on his gray matter, which caused his pallor, lack of coordination and other symptoms.

Doctors diagnosed a subdural hematoma, which often requires surgery but typically can be abated, once the gathering blood has been sucked away.

That evening, after nurses shaved part of Sultanov's thick mane, doctors cut a bone flap in his head and suctioned out blood, relieving the pressure.

"He's talking after the surgery, he's waking up, communicating," recalled Kramer, "and we think, 'Thank God, we're doing all right, we're going to come out of this OK.'"

Shortly after Kramer returned home, however, at about 1 in the morning, nurses noticed that Sultanov was unresponsive and turning blue, signs that he was bleeding internally.

Cranial scans showed the disaster looming inside his head. So much blood was amassing, with nowhere to go, that it began pushing his brain from left to right.

As increasing amounts of blood pummeled the organ, blood vessels to his brain stem and other areas were severed or crushed, denying vital oxygen and glucose to vulnerable tissue.

Not one but five strokes racked Sultanov's brain as he lay in the hospital. Even in surgery, the bleeding continued. Doctors determined that Sultanov at some unknown point had developed a liver condition that prevented his blood from coagulating properly.

Though doctors eventually stanching the hemorrhage, the damage was done. The strokes destroyed portions of his brain that are central to normal life and to the extraordinarily complex task of making music.

Parts of Sultanov's right and left thalamus—the areas of the brain that receive messages from the rest of the body—were destroyed. The strokes also eradicated tissue in the midbrain, which affects eye-muscle control, and the right pons, a crucial portion of the brain stem that allows messages to travel from the brain to the rest of the body. Sultanov's motor abilities were gone.

The images of Sultanov's brain taken on March 1, after these events, "look like a meteorological study of a swirling storm," said Kramer. "They are as close as you can get to a time-lapse depiction of the destruction of a genius."

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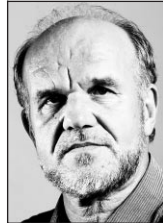
**Coming Monday:** Relearning the piano

### About this story

In 1989, Tribune arts critic Howard Reich chronicled Alexei Sultanov's triumph at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in Ft. Worth. Fifteen years later, after Sultanov had suffered five strokes, Reich returned to Ft. Worth



Reich



Bzdak

with Tribune photographer Zbigniew Bzdak to observe the pianist's recuperation and struggle to play the piano again. For this series, Reich and Bzdak spent more than a year regularly visiting Sultanov and his wife, Dace, traveling to Russia to interview his family and friends, and interviewing leading experts on how the brain processes music.