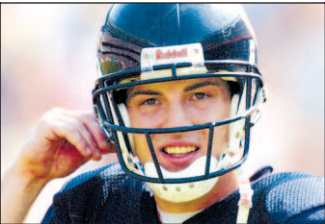


GROSSMAN SHOWS WAY

Takes over at QB in 2nd half in relief of Orton, guides Bears past Falcons



Perfect season denied:
Chargers drop Colts to 13-1

Steelers help Bears by ending
Vikings' winning streak at 6



Chicago Tribune

FINAL

SECOND PART OF A THREE-PART STORY

STRICKEN GENIUS

The life and rebirth of a musical mastermind



Dace Sultanov helped reawaken in her husband, Alexei, a tenuous ability to make music again after the virtuoso suffered five strokes.

RELEARNING THE PIANO SMALL STEPS

Story by Howard Reich
Photos by Zbigniew Bzdak

Alexei Sultanov, once a master of divining Beethoven and Schubert at the piano, placed his still functioning right hand on his Yamaha grand and struggled to find the notes to “Happy Birthday.”

Blind in one eye, incapable of moving the left side of his body and unable to say a word, he fought to press the keys with his five working fingers, producing a soft and incomprehensible cluster of wrong notes.

It had been two years since the prizewinning concert pianist was immobilized by five strokes in a single night, and in that time he had refused to listen to music. The very sound of it, his wife, Dace, believed, tormented him.

Having learned to communicate with her by holding up one finger for “yes” and two for “no,” he immediately gestured “no” whenever she suggested turning on the stereo.

But on this evening—Oct. 12, 2003—after a quiet supper in their Ft. Worth home to celebrate Dace Sultanov’s 35th birthday, the couple’s dinner



Alexei Sultanov tentatively fingers a keyboard.

guest decided to force the issue.

Donna Witten, the pianist’s newest physical therapist, confronted him, insisting that he attempt to play “Happy Birthday” for his wife.

“OK, Alexei, let’s go to the piano,” Witten said.

“Oh, my goodness, it’s late,” Dace responded. She didn’t say what she really was thinking: “I know how he feels about the piano.”

Undaunted, Witten wheeled Sultanov to the ebony grand piano and demanded that he try to peck a little tune.

“You could barely see the fingers move,” recalled Witten, “and very little tone came out.”

Witten then kneeled, placing herself directly in front of Sultanov’s wheelchair.

She stared him in the face and said: “I want you

FIND MORE ONLINE

Hear Alexei Sultanov’s music and find out more about his journey at chicagotribune.com/piano, plus...

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

to play the piano again. You are a fighter, and you can do this. If you want to come back, you can do this.

“And when you take the stage again, I will either be your page turner, or I will be sitting in the center of the front row. And I will be there to applaud.”

Dace Sultanov froze when Witten said those words, believing that her husband either would weep or retreat even more deeply into the shell of his silent, paralyzed body.

Yet Witten pressed further, making another request of Sultanov. It would have been a joke to him a few years before, but now it represented an

PLEASE SEE **SULTANOV**, PAGE 12

Bush reaches out to war foes

But he decries ‘defeatism,’ says victory is crucial

By Jeff Zeleny
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — President Bush declared Sunday evening that the United States is winning the war in Iraq, but he warned doubting Americans that the path to victory remains riddled with violence and uncertainty. He vowed not to fully withdraw troops or retreat until democracy is established in the country.

In a prime-time address from the White House, the president conceded that his administration had underestimated the difficulty of achieving victory and he vowed to listen to “honest criticism” of his Iraq policy.

With a fresh air of contrition, he spoke directly to his detractors, whose ranks have grown since the war began nearly three years ago.

“I have heard your disagreement and I know how deeply it is felt,” Bush said, using the Oval Office as a backdrop for the first time since he announced the Iraq invasion March 19, 2003.

“Yet now there are only two options before our country—victory or defeat. And the need for victory is larger than any president or political party because the security of our people is in the balance.”

Raising his hands for emphasis, he added: “I do not expect you to support everything I do, but tonight I have a request: Do

PLEASE SEE **BUSH**, BACK PAGE

ANALYSIS

President softer, more conciliatory

By Michael Tackett
Tribune senior correspondent

WASHINGTON—In the last five years Americans have seen President Bush in many poses—tough, defiant, emotional. On Sunday night, in a rare Oval Office address, they saw another—humility.

A president loath to concede mistakes did so. A president often dismissive of his critics embraced their right to differ. A president whose patience is easily stretched seemed to ask for empathy from others for decisions gone wrong.

While there was no substantive shift about the war in Iraq during his prime-time speech, there were stylistic ones. He was seated at his desk and let his hands do a lot of talking. His tone was softer. He seemed to be targeting those who disagree with him rather than making sure the converted stayed that way.

To be sure, there also was the now-routinized certitude about the justness of the war and the resolve needed for total victory.

“There is a difference between honest critics who recognize what is wrong, and defeatists who refuse to see anything that is right,” he said.

It was also clear that the pre-

PLEASE SEE **ANALYSIS**, BACK PAGE

So, when is my day off again?

Scheduling school and business breaks is tough this year with Christmas falling on Sunday

By Bonnie Miller Rubin
Tribune staff reporter

One thing is clear: Christmas is Dec. 25. But with the holiday falling on a Sunday this year, the timing of everything else has been thrown into a merry muddle.

Some offices are shutting down on Christmas Eve Eve—in other words, Dec. 23. Others are

designating Dec. 26 as the holiday. And then there are those employees who will find a little something extra in their stocking this year and get both days off.

The calendar quirk also has affected schools, which usually agree on when winter recess starts. But this year, a check with 12 districts had about half dismissing their students last

Friday and the other half—including Chicago Public Schools—requiring children to hang in until the bitter end.

Nowhere is the split personality more evident than in Naperville, where the north side of town has one schedule and the south side another. Some moms are already fretting about the difficulty of setting up play dates, but Kathleen Geekie said she is pleased that her four children won’t be out until Friday.

PLEASE SEE **CHRISTMAS**, PAGE 2

INSIDE

NATION

GOP ties Arctic oil drilling to key defense bill
Democrats cry foul as \$453 billion House bill to fund Iraq war, allow wildlife-refuge drilling nears vote. **PAGE 10**

WORLD

Sharon has stroke
Israeli leader, 77, falls ill after a meeting, rebounds in hospital. **PAGE 3**

HOLIDAY GIVING

Make a difference
To donate, clip the coupon on **PAGE 3** of **SPORTS**.

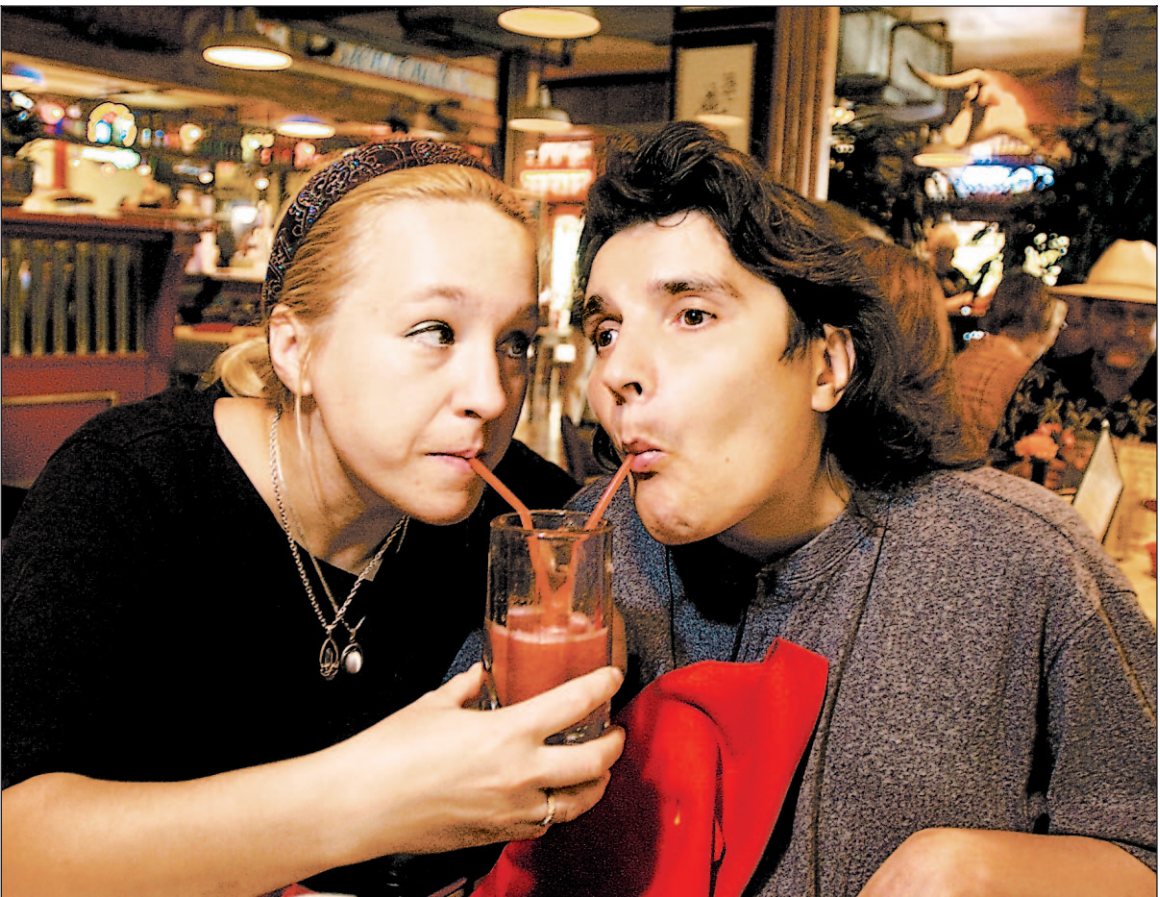


Weather: Sunny, windy and cold; high 23, low 10



STRICKEN GENIUS

Most stroke patients as badly injured as Sultanov fear they might fall during therapy. But he had to be restrained from attempting feats still well beyond his reach.



Dace and Alexei Sultanov share a margarita during dinner at a restaurant last year.



After his comeback performance in the waiting room of his neurologist, Dr. Ed Kramer, Alexei Sultanov gives Kramer a tap.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Everest to the 34-year-old man sitting before her, crumpled in a wheelchair. She asked him to learn "O Holy Night" and to play it for her by Christmas, two months away.

Witten had no idea if he would try. But she believed he could learn to play the piano again—despite his monumental limitations—and that the very act of trying might draw him out, reconnecting him to the world.

She sensed that although Sultanov had lost practically everything during his protracted illnesses, music had survived.

"I could look in his eyes," Witten said, "and see that it was still there."

BREAKING THE SILENCE

In the two difficult years since Sultanov's strokes, music had not existed for him.

As he battled a series of debilitating illnesses related to his surgeries and brain injuries, he refused to allow his wife to play recordings or the radio.

Dace Sultanov yearned for her husband to listen to music again. But he wouldn't consider it until Witten became his physical therapist, in June 2003. Four months later she would roll him to his piano and command him to place his hand on its keys.

A buoyant redhead whose smile and energy exude optimism, Witten had been called to try to relieve Sultanov's severe muscle cramping. But she quickly expanded her role. One of her first strategies was to force Sultanov to stop denying his connection to music.

"When I'm working with him," she told Dace Sultanov, "I want music playing, and I want his music playing."

Dace pulled her aside, out of Sultanov's earshot.

"We can't do that," said Dace (pronounced DAH-tsyeh). "It makes him very sad, and it makes him cry when it's his music, when he hears himself play like he used to."

"Fine, play his favorite music," Witten said. "Anything." Surprisingly to his wife, Sultanov agreed, though his condition prevented him from explaining why.

From then on, the Sultanovs' home hummed again with the sound of symphonies and concertos, boogie-woogie and jazz.

As Witten conducted her twice-weekly therapy sessions—stretching Sultanov's tensed limbs, bending him over a large inflated ball, forcing him to stand on his nearly immovable legs and attempt to walk—Duke Ellington and Count Basie roared in the background.

As she pulled open the fingers of his perpetually clenched left fist, bringing a measure of pliancy to a hand that no longer could lift a toothpick, Frank Sinatra and Nat "King" Cole crooned.

Sultanov responded more enthusiastically than even Witten



It's a high-five for Dace and Alexei Sultanov at an outdoor concert in Ft. Worth during the summer of 2004.

had envisioned, trying to do everything his contorted body would allow, and then some.

Most stroke patients as badly injured as Sultanov fear they might fall during therapy, Witten said. But Sultanov had to be restrained from attempting feats still well beyond his reach.

The man who once relished bungee jumping had lost none of his nerve. His body simply wouldn't allow him to indulge it.

"He was still an incredible risk-taker, still an adrenaline junkie," Witten said. "That's why I could turn him upside down on that ball, and he didn't even bat an eye."

During his tormented childhood, Sultanov turned to jazz as his secret escape from the rigors of his classical Russian training. Now the rhythmic thrust of the music inspired him in a different way.

He absorbed its energy as he struggled to get his body to move. While "Caravan" and "Avalon" screamed over the sound system, Sultanov tried to reach and stretch and maneuver.

It was Sultanov's sheer exuberance that inspired Witten to ask him to play the piano on his wife's birthday.

For reasons that Sultanov was unable to communicate to anyone, he decided to accept Witten's challenge, to play the piano



Dace Sultanov helps her husband, Alexei, move from the bedroom to the kitchen as part of his physical therapy regimen.

Though he once dominated the keyboard, his two hands unleashing a potent combination of speed and power, Alexei Sultanov on this evening found triumph in playing a few spare notes.

with practicing, although the results at first were so poor that even his friends and family wondered if he ever would be able to string together a tune.

When he placed his fingers on the grand piano in the practice room of his house, he barely could produce a sound. His fingers proved too weak to fully depress the keys—a faint echo of the powerful strokes that once severed piano strings.

His wife bought a children's keyboard, and Sultanov began practicing on that, a few minutes each day. He wasn't yet strong enough to sit up straight, and his brain damage marred his perception of his position in space. So Dace Sultanov had to prop up his left side with her shoulder and arm while he began noodling with his unpracticed right hand.

The sounds that emerged at first were "gibberish," said Dr. Ed Kramer, his neurologist, referring to a seemingly random collection of dissonances and musical non sequiturs that made sense to no one, except perhaps Sultanov.

Within weeks, though, he started to find the pitches of "O Holy Night," not from written scores—which he could not read because of his impaired vision—but by ear and from memory.

A couple of days before Christmas 2003, when friends and family congregated at the Sultanov home to celebrate the holiday, Dace wheeled her husband to the portable electric piano she recently had purchased as a holiday gift for both of them. The two began to play "O Holy Night."

Sultanov's father, Faizul, had come to Ft. Worth from Moscow to spend the holiday, and during the living-room concert he phoned home so Sultanov's mother could hear her son playing again.

"I couldn't speak at all, because I was covered with tears. When I composed myself, I asked them to put the phone to Alosha's ear," Natalia Sultanov said, using her son's nickname.

"He couldn't talk, but I said to him, 'This is just the beginning. I love you just like God, with no limits.'"

From that night on, Sultanov practiced the piano as hard as he ever had, perhaps even more so. He no longer was rehearsing under threats from his parents or his teachers, nor to win prizes for fame and lucre.

STRICKEN GENIUS

Perhaps for the first time in his life, Sultanov was playing the piano purely to make music.

RETURNING TO THE STAGE

Dace Sultanov lifted her husband out of his wheelchair and sat him on the piano bench, quickly sidling next to him, so he wouldn't fall over.

She clasped his limp left hand with her right, leaned in close to support his almost immobile body, then gently smiled to the master of ceremonies, indicating that the concert could begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Alexei Sultanov is one of the world's greatest pianists, and Alexei is making his comeback tour," said Dr. Kramer.

Sultanov's return performance was taking place in the waiting room of Kramer's neurology office.

Patients sitting in wheelchairs and clutching canes and crutches listened raply. They savored the re-emergence of a former celebrity who once bantered with David Letterman on TV, played to roaring ovations in Carnegie Hall, toured the cultural citadels of Europe many times over and seized piano trophies as if for sport.

On this June evening of 2004, however, the glamor of those occasions gave way to bright fluorescent lighting and a backdrop of metal filing cabinets.

The Sultanovs sat down at their portable electric piano, wearing sweats and T-shirts. Yet they acted no differently than if they were about to play in Royal Albert Hall on a Steinway grand, decked out in tux and gown.

Having helped reawaken in her husband a tenuous ability to make music with the only part of his body that he still could control—his right hand—Dace hardly could wait to start.

The pianist's wife cranked up the volume on their keyboard, counting off a couple of beats. Soon the two musicians were awirl in Tchaikovsky's "Sweet Dreams," a children's piece, though played in a manner that might have surprised the composer.

Alexei Sultanov haltingly began to sketch the melody line, while a boom-chicka, boom-chicka rhythm track pulsed in the

background and Dace filled in chords that, on this instrument, recalled Booker T. and the MG's more than Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

The lumbering fingers of Sultanov's right hand walked slowly up and down the keyboard, yet they missed nary a note.

Though he once dominated the keyboard, his two hands unleashing a potent combination of speed and power, Sultanov on this evening found triumph in playing a few spare notes, one at a time, in slow synchronicity with his wife's accompaniment.

Still, the tug of Tchaikovsky's music and the sight of Sultanov's bent frame hovering over the instrument visibly moved listeners in the neurologist's office. Their applause at the close of "Sweet Dreams" apparently emboldened the pianist.

Before long, he was adding flourishes to Schubert's Impromptu in A-Flat—the same piece his fingers had mimed when he lay unconscious in his Ft. Worth hospital bed three years earlier. As his recital gathered momentum, he improvised a few extra notes in Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 and pushed the tempo in the pulpy Italian song "O Sole Mio."

The man was taking chances now, though they were so subtle that only a musician likely would perceive them. Occasionally, when Sultanov stumbled on a phrase, his wife rushed in to complete it, the way longtime couples often do in conversation.

Though it was difficult to read emotion on Sultanov's face—left virtually frozen since his strokes—it sounded as if he were relishing the moment, judging by the increasing zest of his playing.

Soon the Sultanovs were delivering encores, answering requests for "America the Beautiful," "The Star-Spangled Banner," Christmas carols and various pop tunes, the crowd singing along.

But the concert in Kramer's office was just the beginning. Other audiences awaited in nursing homes, hospitals and wherever else injured people could appreciate Sultanov's damaged art.

His comeback had begun. hreich@tribune.com

Coming Tuesday: Coda to a new career