



Martins' Passion

Proposal for a documentary film

by Irene Langemann

Producer Wolfgang Bergmann



A novelist would have a hard time trying to come up with a life story as unbelievable as the one of Brazilian star pianist João Carlos Martins. His is a tale of success and personal tragedy, of traumatic injuries and triumphant comebacks. It encompasses musical heights as well as the morass of political intrigues and financial scandals. And therefore it is no wonder that João Carlos Martins' life history is just being made into a film script in Hollywood.



João Carlos Martins, "born to do great things with the piano" (*Washington Post*), has been considered a world-class Bach interpreter ever since the 1960s. In 1997 he completed his colossal life's work – a recording of the complete piano works of Bach. The pianist is proud of this and happy about it, for today he could not have managed it. For the past two years João Carlos Martins has been sitting at the piano making his left hand work for two. His left hand over and over again. Until his muscles and fingers can remember the unusual leaps. The reason being that Rachmaninov composed these variations the pianist is now studying for a spectacular recording for two hands. For two unscathed and technically perfect hands. Martins himself created this left-handed version, because his right hand has been crippled for two years.

The very beginning of his career is linked to an illness. Born 1940 in São Paulo, Martins begins playing the piano at the age of seven. His father buys a piano for him to take his thoughts off his illness. Two years before a tumour was removed from the João Carlos' neck. Ever since the boy has been hiding his open, dripping wound behind a huge plastic collar, refuses to go to school and is becoming ever more lonely. His father's wish is to come true. The piano becomes the boys only refuge from pain and teasing. He practices up to eight hours every day, the dream of his life being to become an outstanding pianist. The Wunderkind, that has recovered from its illness by the age of ten, prepares for public



as a grown-up. He gets “help” before every concert from his Mama, who is a spiritualist. She “calls upon the spirit” of the piano god Busoni and beckons her son in Italian, although she actually doesn’t speak a word of that language: “I am Ferruccio Busoni and I will be with you throughout the concert. You will do magic with the piano.” “I believed my mother”, - Martins says today, - “I felt I could fly, I could do anything.” Seeing the super-8 films of the pianist who was twelve at the time, you tend to believe it, too – expressive, concentrated and full of devotion he seems to become one with his piano.



“Nothing is impossible” soon becomes the motto of Martins’ life. Piano gods like Alfred Cortot foretell him a great future.

Indeed, the years to follow are like a triumphal procession for Martins. “I succeeded in everything” –concludes Martins when looking back on these years. In the 1950s Brazil was caught up in a kind of piano mania – countless festivals and competitions constantly produced new talent. But João Carlos Martins outshines all competitors and his international career begins at the age of nineteen. His debut concert in Washington turns out to be an outstanding success. The next day the newspapers feature pictures of Martins with the subtitle: “A new star is born in the international piano scene”.



J.C.M with the Brazilian pianist Guiomar Novaes
Eduardo



J.C.M with Margeritte Long and brother José

He plays for Castro and Kennedy, plays sold-out performances at Carnegie Hall. He has engagements with all the major orchestras in the US, performs solo concerts in Europe, and records the album “The Well-Tempered Clavier”. Critics reacted ecstatically as well and praised the “clearest, most articulated and vital keyboard playing you have ever heard”. “I come from the South”, Martins says, “my Bach is like a bustling crowd of people, he is full of warmth, joy and virtuosity.”



And somehow this is the way the vivacious pianist lives his life. During his first tour through South America the nineteen year old takes up quarters in a brothel in Cartagena. It was there he lost his innocence, Martins adds with a roguish smile. Concerts alternate with lessons in love. When the ladies in the brothel see his picture in the paper, they wish to attend one of his concerts. Martins reserves seats for his "family". Eight dolled up ladies take their seats in the box next to the cardinal and the mayor. As soon as the pianist enters the stage they greet him with applause and shouting as if he were a rock star. The ovations for Tchaikovsky's First Concert he plays that evening are frenetic.

The first downfall comes in 1966. At that time the pianist is living in New York with his first wife. He is playing soccer in Central Park with some of his friends who are in Brazil's National Team. He can easily keep up with them as he has been playing soccer ever since he was a little boy. But this time the challenge for the ball ends with a fall. A stone digs into his elbow. A few months later the pianist realizes that three fingers of his right hand are going numb. The drama of Martins' life begins. He has to have a complicated operation. He starts playing again after tedious rehabilitation. His picture appears on the title of "The Washington Post" and displays metal braces on his affected fingers. Nobody notices this – but during the second part of the concert his fingers are so badly swollen they begin to bleed.

Pianist Performs Recital With Braces on Fingers



The Washington Post
JOAO CARLOS MARTINS
... note braces on fingers

Front page of The Washington Post, 1965.

By Paul Hume
Washington Post Staff Writer
Joao Carlos Martins played a piano recital yesterday afternoon in Lisner Auditorium under physical conditions that would have stopped many other pianists.

During the first half of the concert, while he played four preludes and fugues from the First Book of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, and the Ginastera Sonata, Martins had metal braces on the middle, fourth, and fifth fingers of his right hand.

Finding out, at intermission, that the fingers were beginning to swell, he removed the braces and spent the time soaking his hands in warm water. The second half of the concert, with another four

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The pianist painfully struggles through some more concerts. "I wasn't playing music any more. I was going out on stage to see whether I could still move my fingers." Unknowingly Martins has changed his hand posture after his injury and has developed what is called the "repetitive motion syndrome". He has lost control over his fingers. After a disappointing performance in New York in 1970 Martins sells both his grand pianos and returns to Brazil. The dream of his life seems to have come to an end.



For seven years he shuns the piano. He becomes a stockbroker's apprentice in a bank in São Paulo and gets into the Brazilian stock market. Thanks to careful analysis and decisions making he is able to pull off several coups and he becomes a successful stockbroker. He is offered the management of the Department of Tourism by the bank's board of directors. At the same time Martins founds a travel agency. He earns a lot of money and never talks about his beloved Bach. The musician has transformed into a manager. One day he meets the former world-boxing champion Eder Jofre in the street and decides to promote him on the spot. His position enables him to get into show business. He starts managing boxing matches and rock concerts, he brings Alice Cooper to Brazil. But the feeling of emptiness grows with every day that passes. "The next steps would have been the Mafia."



J.C.M with Keith Emerson



J.C.M with Dave Brubeck

One evening he watches a well-known Brazilian pianist performing on television. He likes him, but knows he, João Carlos Martins, can do it better. That instant he starts planning his comeback. From then on he practices for ten hours every day and soon realizes that the "repetitive motion syndrome" has eased off – the year-long break seems to have been just the right therapy. After a year the pianist calls his former agent Jay Hoffmann and says to him: "Book Carnegie Hall for me."

The taxi has to slowly fight its way down Fifth Avenue on that evening in October 1979. "You'd better walk", the driver tells Martins, "some maniac is playing there that everyone wants to see." His first concert draws such an enormous crowd, that 300 chairs had to be put onto the stage of Carnegie Hall. Martin's comeback is triumphant. "He played with brilliance. He seemed clearly on his way back in the first rank of world pianists", the commentators rejoiced. "Carnegie Hall had just attended one of the biggest ovations of its history." (*Associated Press*)

German producer Heiner Stadler, who lives in New York, sets about a gigantic project – he wants to record Bach's complete works with Martins. Amongst the first ten CDs are the "Goldberg Variations", "The Well-Tempered Clavier" and "Six Partitas". Stylistically Martins transcends many borders. His Bach is as romantic as Chopin and as frivolous as Samba. The critics tear him to pieces and praise him. The *New York Times* raves about him: "His technique shoots fireworks in all directions". "The most exciting player of Bach on the modern piano to emerge since Glenn Gould", the *Boston Globe* enthusiastically writes. Leonard Bernstein told him after the concert his piano playing sounded like a whole orchestra. Martins is back on top.



In 1982 the Brazilian star receives a call from the mayor of São Paulo requesting him to become Minister of the Department of Culture of the megalopolis. Martins declines. A few weeks later he hears about the closure of several theatres in his hometown. He accepts the position for ten months the very same day. Enough time, so he thinks, to pass legislation for the protection of the national cultural and historical heritage and the environment. Martins' wife Carmen remembers the many television cameras directed towards a grand piano rising towards the skies on the side of a skyscraper. The reason for this being that, on assuming the post, the pianist had insisted on the opportunity to practice in his office. Within the following months he actually succeeds in saving the town theatres and several forests along the Atlantic coast. But during this time his health is rapidly deteriorating. The pain in his right hand worsens. He is obliged to cancel several concerts and recording sessions. "At the age of 45 I said to myself: I want to live. I want to travel, I want to be a perfectly ordinary person, I have suffered enough", Martins recalls. He demotes Bach to second place and founds a building company. 1990 he gets into politics. This road takes him into the political mire of Brazil. The artist gets involved with the candidate for the office of mayor, Paulo Maluf. He begins to raise campaign funds for him. Maluf later repaid his backer for his support. One day the Brazilian secret service force entry into his house and seize 17 000 documents. Now he is in the newspapers every day, even his reputation as a pianist is being questioned. "I have made the worst mistake of my life. I have risked going to prison. But I was able to prove that I had not enriched myself." But even the fact that the Supreme Court dismissed the action doesn't help him, Martins is stigmatised.

He returns to Bach. Again he gets himself into performance fitness and is able to continue work on the great Bach edition. In 1993 he performs with the Symphonic Orchestra in Sofia. He records "The English Suites", rehearses for the "Brandenburgischen Konzerte". The Bach edition is nearing completion when on his way back to the hotel after an exhausting rehearsal two adolescent gypsies beat him up with iron bars. During the assault, of all things, the brains cells that coordinated the movement of his right arm are damaged.

An incredible struggle begins, much tougher than all his comebacks before. Martins has to work for almost a year in the Jackson Memorial Hospital in Florida to learn to play the piano again. He sits at a computer plastered with electrodes and memorizes the curves on the monitor that are formed through the movement of the fingers. His brain is retrained with the aid of computers. He now has to control his right hand by means of his speech centre. Which means he has to give up basic functions. "I could not hold a fork in my hand after a year, but I played the piano with all my might", Martins says.





The attending physician, Bernhard Bruckner, later said he had never encountered a patient as diligent as Martins: "He worked ten hours a day." Film material exists that shows Martins, racked with pain, repeating the same passages over and over again with eyes tightly shut and lips firmly pressed together. One can see his middle finger, sticking out abnormally, he has great difficulties moving and controlling. But he succeeds once again. He continues work on his Bach recordings and plays brilliant concerts in the US and Brazil. But reprogramming the brain has its price. When he talks he has to move his hand. In the long run this means unbearable pain. Quite often the pianist breaks off in conversation, drowned in tears. He is unable to maintain relationships. His life takes place between the grand piano and his bedroom, where he summons the strength to complete his Bach edition.

One of the last concerts he played with both hands is filmed in Sofia. His middle finger has already become useless and is tied to his palm. João Carlos Martins plays Mozart and Haydn. With nine fingers. He changed the complete fingering and taught his left hand to take on passages the right hand would normally play.



Because of overwhelming pain and loneliness the pianist let cut through the nerve of his right hand two years ago. He had finished the recordings of his Bach, now he wants to be with people again, João Carlos Martins tells me when I met him. He places his crippled right hand on the table. With every word he speaks movements like cramps appear underneath the skin. The spasms are still there but the pain is gone, he tells me in a relaxed manner.



JCM with Pele

He is an inquisitive and impulsive person to talk to, and on this sunny afternoon in Cologne he asks about many matters of life. But what interests him most at the moment is the football World Cup in far away Asia. There his eldest son, a sports journalist, interviewed an old friend of his – soccer legend Pelé. Germany and Brazil will meet in the world cup final, the ex-champion has foretold. Martins gives a roguish nod. He is obviously sure that Brazil will win the final.

For his personal final he has already given the starting whistle. He wants to do great things until his 70th birthday. Jay Hoffmann, Martins first – and as he says – last agent, has begun to reorganize his life for him. The pianist has taken on the complete repertoire for left hand. His **left-handed** comeback is supposed to be at least as brilliant as all that came before. The people will soon notice that he, the comeback artist, has more to say with one hand than most others with two.



The filmic approach:

The centre of attention is João Carlos Martins, his dazzling life and his passionate character. The preparation for his big left-handed comeback and the concert at Carnegie Hall as the absolute highlight form the film's framework. Seen from this perspective it is a story of success: a tragic hero overcomes all manner of human and artistic barriers to become a titanic person. As a parallel to Martins everyday life today the broken universe of his earlier life is to be reconstructed, including his countless sacrifices and his unyielding willpower.

- Shielded from the pulsating streets of São Paulo João Carlos Martins prepares for his comeback in his penthouse apartment. Grey and still in his pyjamas he sits at the grand piano and beats the keys with his left hand. While the one hand produces this whirl of sounds the crippled right hand clings to the grand piano's frame. That is all he is able to do with it. On top of the black lacquered lid there lays another right hand, made of white marble, large and immaculate. Strain and devotion make the man at the grand piano moan and groan. On the picture in the silver frame he smiles alongside Pelé and Salvador Dalí. A call from the States. Martins' Agent Jay Hoffmann talks about the upcoming concert and promotion dates. They discuss the details. That's how the film's story could begin.
- As every Friday Martins fights his way through the throng of the big city traffic to the suburb of Cubatão where his building company used to be. There he meets children from the slums. The meeting place – a music school. The occasion – piano lessons. But first the pianist, who was badly injured while playing soccer, kicks the ball with his pupils for a while. After all, we are in Brazil! Later on they move to the piano. "I place their hands upon the keys", the artist describes this honorary activity. He forms their little hands into little domes, lets them glide over the keys again and again, as his own teacher used to do with him. And there we are amidst Martins' childhood.
- With his elder brother José Eduardo, who is the Director of the Music Department of the University of São Paulo nowadays, our protagonist remembers Mamas invocations of "Busoni's spirit" and his first great successes. The brothers watch super-8 films their father made at the time – piano competitions and soccer matches. They remember how it all began – the bad illness that paved Martins' way to Bach. Whose music will be heard throughout the film – Brazilian Bach.
- One evening the hospitable pianist has invited some friends. Amongst them is Pelé, the most famous Brazilian. The soccer legend has a secret weakness – he has been writing love songs for quite some time he would like to sing accompanied by Martins. This evening it is finally supposed to take place. The guests are in joyful anticipation. The two stars begin their private concert. In the ensuing discussion the two men talk about their eventful past and early fame.
- An old film shows Martins as an eighteen-year-old – the boy is as thin as a rake, has endlessly long arms and fingers and with his youthful spirit he enthusiastically plays a Prokofjev sonata. With this performance at the Casals Festival in Puerto Rico he begins his ascend into the Olympus of pianists. He is celebrated all over the world. Martins personal memories will be by means of stock shots (for example an NBC feature about



- a concert with the renowned conductor Zubin Metha) and the accounts of his agent Jay Hoffmann.
- The pianist and his agent meet in New York to discuss the concert at Carnegie Hall. After that they stroll through Central Park. Martins remembers the fatal soccer match that led to his first career coming to an abrupt end.
- In his hotel room Martins sits leaning over the dumb keyboard he always carries with him on his travels. His left hand flies across the keys. The breathtaking tempo of the klack-klack-klack variations sounds like a challenge. Martins practices leaps as would a boxer his punches for a boxing match. How many of those did he watch in the 1970s when he pushed flyweight Eder Jofre? Martins, the big sports fanatic, is watching a boxing match. Sweaty beads appear on the dark faces of the boxer, their jabs are constantly becoming more forceful and their dancing steps more nervous. In a similar way the pianist had formerly fought by all possible means to avoid becoming unconscious. He didn't succeed. All the anger and desperation of those days resurface. Martins talks about the boxing matches he promoted, about Alice Cooper, the years in the stockmarket, the emptiness, that constantly surrounded him and the relieving TV concert. Maybe we can win Alice Cooper's support for this episode.
- Martins' triumphant comeback at Carnegie Hall in 1979 has been captures in a CBS feature. New York-based German producer Heiner Stadler is enthusiastic about the Brazilian Bach. A year-long but not always peaceful cooperation commences. Stadler, the perfectionist, was fastidious. "I boiled with rage, I left the studio, only to admit that Stadler was right the very next day and start all over again", Martins says today. We will see these two in the film during re-recordings. Firstly, Martins records the left hand part of the composition. Then, with the assistance of earphones, he plays the right hand part with his left hand.
- Martins and Pelé talk about transcending borders and about the endless possibilities of mankind. About overcoming physical and emotional pain. About dealing with age, about human strength and manly potency.
- We visit some of the former Ladies of the brothel in Cartagena and let them talk about their experiences in those days. The gray-haired maestro plays Bach left-handedly beneath palm trees. The women, who aren't very young anymore either listen in rapt adoration. The sounds of Bach mix with the clamor and voices of the tropical night.
- The sequence about Martins' political downfall begins with a stock shot showing the grand piano rising up the skyscraper's façade. His wife Carmen and his children from previous marriages still vividly remember the events that took place then. Martins' daughter Daniela has become a specialist for economic criminality as a result of her



- personal experiences. Her recollections and the stock shots of Martins' former opponent will give us an idea of that time and of Brazilian politics.
- With the aid of Martins' physician Bernhard Brucker in Jackson Memorial Hospital and old tape recordings and several video tapes we will reconstruct Martins' brain injury after the assault in Bulgaria and the month-long training of his speech center. In the meanwhile, Bernhard Brucker has founded a center for brain research and the treatment of paralysis in Miami. Amongst his famous patients are Mohammed Ali and Christopher Reeves. Interesting conversations might arise.
- In Leipzig the pianist walks through the "Thomaskirche", the church in which Johann Sebastian Bach worked as a cantor. Martins has dreamed of this moment all his life. Organ music can be heard from above: An organist is rehearsing a Bach chorale. Martins ascends the stairs and listens to him playing. It is a highly emotionally meeting full of inspired music. Words are superfluous.
- On the September 14th Martins plays a concert at Carnegie Hall. Jay Hoffmann had booked the concert hall two years in advance. When he had booked it, the fixed date had been September 11th 2002. After the events of the past year the concert has been postponed for a few days. And it can't be a coincidence that his new comeback seems like a self-sacrifice. His greatest work of art might be his life itself.

Those are a few of the film's episodes, others will be added. Martins' spontaneity will surely be good for some surprises. We would also like to get Dave Brubeck, Zubin Metha and Keith Emerson to be in the film.

So far there is no documentary film about João Carlos Martins, only a few short features about his appearances and recordings of his concerts from the age of twelve until today.



JCM mit seiner Frau Carmen