

When Felicity Bleckly went deaf, she believed she never would hear again let alone play her beloved piano

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Felicity Bleckly, of Strathalbyn, got a cochlear implant fitted and she started to play the piano again. It changed her life. Photo: Naomi Jellicoe

FELICITY Bleckly deftly moves her fingers over the familiar black and white piano keys that she knows so well.

There is dead silence in the crowded concert hall in Warsaw, Poland, but for the sound of the 63-year-old playing the moving melody *Ballade Pour Adeline*.

Hundreds of people from across the world watch the talented pianist in wonder and appreciation.

It is a huge achievement for a woman who lived completely deaf for two decades and was told by doctors she would never hear again.

If you'd asked her back then whether she believed she would ever perform at an international concert this year in Europe, she would have laughed.

But for Mrs Bleckly, of Strathalbyn, the miracles of modern science – the invention of the cochlear implant – has enabled her to do what she loves again.

The piece she played in front of a packed audience at the *Beats of Cochlea* international music festival in Poland in July has special significance. It is the same song, an adaption by one of her favourite composers, Richard Clayderman, she heard for the first time since giving up hope she would ever experience the gift of sound again after she went completely deaf in her mid-30s.

She will never forget the moment her first cochlear implant was switched on when she was aged 52.

“My audiologist said to me, ‘why don’t you go and buy a favourite CD’. But, of course, how do you buy a favourite CD when you haven’t listened to music for two decades?” she said. “I put the (Clayderman) CD on and it was just noise, I had no sense whatsoever what I was listening to.”

But then came the moment of recognition.

“I was busy writing an assignment, as I was studying a Bachelor of Arts and Internet Studies at the time, and I had put the music on ... and I suddenly knew what was playing,” she said.

“I jumped off my chair, danced around the lounge room with tears streaming down my face. I knew then I’d play piano again.”



Felicity Bleckly playing at the Beats of Cochlea Festival at Warsaw, Poland, in July.

Growing up in St Marys, Mrs Bleckly vividly remembers starting piano lessons aged six.

“My elder sister played the piano and I apparently begged my mother for the lessons,” she recalled, adding she practised four hours a day and completed exams up to Grade 7. At age nine she had a bad dose of the measles. Years later, doctors believed it could have been the cause of her hearing loss. A routine school hearing test when she was aged 16 first detected her condition.

“They sent us a letter sometime later saying that I had high frequency hearing loss but I didn’t have any more tests at the time,” she said.

She could still hear in her late teens, but at age 18, doctors told her to “give up and learn lip reading (because) you’ll be totally deaf before you’re 20”.

Through her 20s, she married, became a mum and her love of music continued as she worked selling pianos and organs in Queensland. By night, she taught piano lessons and played “easy listening music” at restaurants and pubs.

To this day, Mrs Bleckly can’t pinpoint the exact moment she went deaf. But, by the time she turned 28, she had lost all her hearing in her left ear. At 35, she was completely deaf in both ears.

Her beloved piano went untouched and eventually she sold it.

“That was heartbreaking – I never thought I would ever play again,” she said.



Felicity playing the piano at the Royal Show when she was 17.

For two decades she suffered. Her deafness made it hard to hold down a job so she moved back to Adelaide.

“I couldn’t hear the phone ring, I couldn’t hear anybody knock on the door,” she said.

“I became extremely lonely and I decided if I didn’t do something about it, I might not last, I really got that depressed.

“I knew I wanted a partner,” she said, adding she met her second husband, Rob, 67, on the internet in the late ’90s and never heard his voice until after her cochlear implant was finally fitted in December 2002.

“The first one is ‘wow, I can hear, I can understand speech’,” she said.

She rushed out to buy a piano as soon as the implant was switched on and a few years later, a second implant was fitted.

“Music sounds way better. Before, if I listened to a choir it was a really nice sound but now I can hear the harmonies and individual voice sections,” she said. “I want to complete Grade 8 and then go on (to the diplomas).”

She credits her love of music to her gift of sound.

“There is research to show that music engages your full brain and playing it is even better,” she said. “I believe because I played the piano ... that is the reason I can hear better now.”