

COURAGE OF A GENIUS

[Evening Standard; London \(UK\), May 28, 2010](#) | by [BARRY MILLINGTON](#)

JANINA FIALKOWSKA Cadogan Hall, SW1 THIRTY-FIVE years ago, the Canadian pianist Janina Fialkowska had the world at her feet. She'd just won the inaugural Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Master Competition and the great man had taken her under his wing, believing her talent to be exceptional. Towards the end of his life he would accept invitations to play only if she too received an engagement.

But as time went on, Fialkowska began to be aware of physical difficulties. Finally, in 2002, she was found to have an aggressive malignant tumour in her upper left arm. But that wasn't the end of it: she made a series of comebacks, only to be confronted with further outbreaks of the cancer in her arm and lung.

So courageous has been her battle with illness and pain, so unshakeable her determination to return to the stage -- not least to play Chopin -- that one could be forgiven for suspending normal critical judgment.

In fact, no such indulgence is necessary. As she demonstrated in Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Jahja Ling (in a programme that also included a somewhat routine Sibelius 2), Fialkowska is by any standards a truly outstanding pianist.

The first thing you notice is the gorgeous tone: warm, rounded, belllike in the upper register, rich lower down. It's well supported too, so that forte passages make their effect without discomfort.

Characterised by subtle nuances rather than demonstrative gestures, her Chopin is poised, natural and exquisite without any trace of affectation. We have had many celebrated executants in London in this Chopin anniversary year -- Zimerman, Pollini and Yundi Li among them -- but none has taken my breath away quite like Fialkowska.

If you have the chance to hear her, cancel all other appointments.