

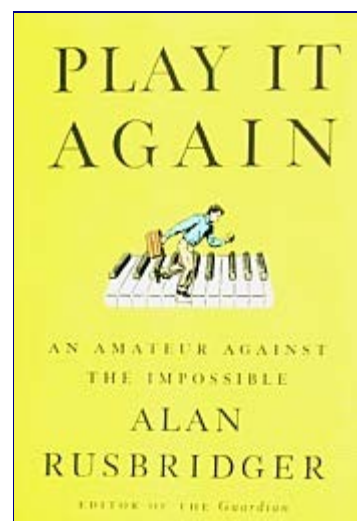
Site Map: [MAIN](#) / [A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2](#) [Webpage](#) [Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

Play It Again
An Amateur Against The Impossible
by
Alan Rusbridger
Editor of the *Guardian*

ARJ2 Chapter: Evolution of Consciousness
Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux/NY in
2013
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2015



The books I read are books I have selected based on my current interests, but I keep open to possibilities for books to surprise me. This book came to me from our Book Club leader who had not read it in time for the upcoming meeting and offered it to anyone interested in the topic. My musical studies with Prof. Bob Greenberg through his Teaching Co. courses led me to suspect this would be of interest. I have a good friend, Ed Smith, who, like Alan Rusbridger, was a busy executive when he suddenly decided as an adult to play a public concert of Beethoven's Concerto No. 3 in C minor for piano and orchestra. I contacted Ed and sent a short description of this book and he replied:

[Ed Smith] I loved the part where Rusbridger says "he became just good enough to know how much better the pros were." I believe that is the level I attained. People tell me that my playing sounds like a pro. These are people who have not attained a high enough level of amateur performance to recognize the difference. I must confess that I enjoy listening to my own CDs because for me they are powerful with feeling, something I don't always get from professional performances.

In a curious coincidence, Ed had also played two Chopin *Ballades*, including the *Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Opus 23*. It is this work which Alan Rusbridger describes so thoroughly in this book, keeping a detailed journal of his year and a half journey to playing the piece for his Master Class. While learning this piece, Alan was dealing with tight publication deadlines due to the WikiLeaks and phone hacking news breakthroughs, often having to coordinate the release of his *Guardian* issues with international journals in the USA and Germany in disparate time zones. Any early release could greatly upset the other two journals by giving the *Guardian* a scoop. This was Alan's foreground job which consumed him for 80 or so hours a week, while in the background he was tackling an incredibly challenging piano piece, so complicated that he had to memorize large pages of music, some of which he likened to being filled with "squashed flies on the page". (Page 359) Memorizing music was not Alan's forte, but he had no choice as some of the complicated passages began on one page and ended on another allowing the pianist no time to turn the page.

The definition of the word *amateur* has devolved in recent decades to mean a *dilettante*, someone who is not serious about some endeavor, but merely dabbles in it. Originally amateur meant a "lover of" some activity, and until the time of recorded music most people heard music played and sung by amateurs in their homes. The only music one could buy was sheet music and without an amateur with a voice and an

instrument around, the music remained on the sheets, unheard. Alan and Ed are amateurs only in that original sense of the word as lovers of music, talented amateurs, of course, and they are able to discern the difference between a professional musician and an amateur.

From Rusbridger's discussions with many other pianists who have played *Ballade No. 1* we come to understand that the coda is especially challenging and noteworthy to all of them, with its flying trapeze leaps of the Right Hand part.

[page 16] The coda is the bit nearly every pianist fears, no matter how good they are, no matter how many hundreds of hours they've put into this piece. It explodes. It's presto con fuoco — extremely fast and fiery. The syncopated rhythms can throw and confuse the ear, the feet, the brain and the fingers. The RH is soon flying up and down the keyboard in trapeze-like leaps completely unrelated to the LH's own jumps. Something diabolic is happening — the listener must hear that — a sense of loss of control and a shattering of all earthly order. But how to convey that abandon without a loss of technical control?

Was this challenge enough to scare away the faint of heart from even attempting this piece? Yes, but Alan felt up to it, though not without trepidation.

[page 22] At any other time in my life, I would quietly have closed the music and put it back on the shelf. The added fear overlaying the entire enterprise is that I have never memorized a note of music in my life. I can't remember poetry, dates, phone numbers, films, novels — or music. Given that half of the piece is unplayable unless the eyes are on the hands and not on the score, I have no idea how, in my late 50s, I am going to retrain my brain.

Clearly Alan is going to need help, and he finds it in the form of books, films, brain specialists, and piano teachers. Here's an example of advice by Charles Cooke, an amateur piano player himself. Alan had identified twelve horrors, he called them, in the *Ballade*, the coda being the prominent one. Cooke suggested that the pianist approach a piece by "identifying the weakest moments in a piece and turn them into the strongest". Easier said than done, but each piece of advice was like another stepping stone across the treacherous waters of the *Ballade* which threatened to drown Alan if he made but one misstep along the way.

In addition to playing the *Ballade*, Alan decided he needed a new piano and a place to play the piano, a small room for intimate recitals with a few friends. He had the location in mind in the back of his cottage grounds at Blockley, about a third of an acre with lots of springs underground. He planned the piano room in the corner of the lot against a hill, all of which required piping to remove the water, lots of pilings to support the foundation, and a careful architect to produce the plans and carry them out. Just overseeing building this music room would filled the spare time of any amateur, but luckily Alan knew less about building than music and he hired professionals to do the design and the construction, while he carved out an hour a day to practice the *Ballade*. Or at least he strived to get an hour, but soon the crush of WikiLeaks and phone hacking news-breaking pushed him down to about 20 minutes a day. Every music teacher he consulted told him it was impossible to learn this piece playing less than an hour a day, but he went ahead anyway. In my experience, if you have a difficult job you want done, give it to a *busy* person! This seems paradoxical, but busy people already know how to get the impossible done, and if they accept the job, it will get done. Alan gave the job to himself. It was the Matterhorn to him, and he decided to climb it.

[page 44] I think of the Matterhorn analogy. Looking at Matterhorn websites, it doesn't seem way off. Jerry R. Hobbs, an American computational linguistics expert and amateur climber, described the mountain as 'just about the hardest climb an ordinary person can do', which, apropos the G minor *Ballade*, sounds familiar. 'The climb is

relentless. For the entire climb, there's never anything resembling a path. If you stop, you can only perch. You're always looking for handholds, and your average step would be like stepping onto a chair, if only the ledge were that big. Always up, up, up.' Which also sounds like a description of tackling Op. 23.

Surely it can't be that bad, some of you might think, besides think of the thrill of reaching the summit. After reading Hobbs' description of the summit, you might change your mind.

[page 44, Hobbs] 'one side is a sheer rock cliff and the other side is a steep slope of snow and the top itself is a track of footprints in the snow at the edge of the cliff. If your right foot slips, you end up in Switzerland. If your left foot slips, you end up in Italy.'

Rusbridger compares the summit of the Matterhorn to scaling the coda of the *Ballade* which he says "induces night sweats in even professional pianists." Then he finds a pianist, Gary, who climbed out of deep despair by playing the *Ballade*. It came after Gary had finished watching the 2002 movie by Roman Polanski, "The Pianist", in which a famous Jewish pianist Szpilman escapes from Warsaw by playing the *Ballade* to a Nazi officer. Gary told Alan that, "It didn't take me very long to remember the notes." Turns out Gary played the piece continuously for three years, five or six times a day. Then when he was asked to play it in public, he spend an hour and a half a day of real practice. *Not* what Alan, with his twenty-minutes-a-day practice schedule, wanted to hear.

[page 62, 63] I leave Gary feeling both uplifted and daunted. The story's an inspiring one — someone who had sunk low and was in something close to black despair who had found his way back to life through the associations of one ten-minute piece of music. I actually think of the piece very differently: far from the ending expressing hope, it seems to me to be about disintegration and despair. But it had, in the film, saved Szpilman's life and it had, in a way, saved Gary's.

As the father of three daughters, I must agree with Alan that Schuman's "Child Falling Asleep" must be played as if one were attempting to leave a child one has just helped to fall asleep.

[page 66] To me there's something so hushed and tender about a child falling asleep — every parent learns the art of imperceptibly moving out from under a child so as not to wake her, and tiptoeing from the room. I have done that a thousand times with our daughters. The piece graphically describes that feeling -- with the magical, velvet moment when the piece arrives in E major, and the ever-slowng breathing of the last few bars as sleep finally settles.

"Steinway has its own forest?" Alan asked Clive Ackroyd, head technician of the Royal Academy of Music. Why would Steinway need its own forest when there are lots of forests of spruce trees around, I wondered myself. Clive reacted before answering Alan's question.

[page 81] He looked at me quizzically, as if wondering how this could be possibly be news to anyone. Yes, it has its own forest and it takes the wood from the center of the forest, where the trees have to grow taller in order to reach the light. The trees are therefore straighter, which means you get a superior cut of wood for the soundboard. Other, lesser, piano manufacturers presumably have to make do with the punier spruce trees at the edge of whichever plantation serves as their spruce.

To me the reasons for the popularity of Steinway Pianos for concert venues suddenly became apparent. Plus Alan spent a lot of time describing the various models of Steinways he tried playing on while looking for the ideal piano for his new Music Room at Blockley. He played on a 1908 Model O, he tried a Steinway B, and moved to a 1978 Model O which he deemed to be destined for Blockley.

During a recent trip to New York City, I attended a reception in the Anthroposophical Section at which a

pianist, Paul Catalon, was playing on an old Steinway piano. In the noisy room, I was the only person listening to the piano, so I asked him what model it was. He said, it was 1903, so I asked if it might be a Model O. He said, "No, it is a model L and still in great shape, music-wise." The corners of the piano were worn over time, but the great sound of a Steinway apparently lasts indefinitely.

When Alan had a chance to have dinner with Ronnie Harwood, the writer of the movie, *The Pianist*, he verified a bit of the back story he had heard from Gary, that Szpilman actually saved his own life by playing Chopin's posthumous nocturne instead of the *Ballade*.

[page 93] So, I asked Ronnie, whose idea was it to have the Ballade instead? 'It was mine,' he says, his voice husky through a life of chain-smoking. 'It's the most important scene in the film and it had to work emotionally. I listened to so much Chopin at the time to get exactly the right piece.'

On Friday, 3 December, the WikiLeaks story breaks out like a 9/11 event in global diplomacy, consuming all of Alan's time except for the scant twenty minutes a day he devotes to the *Ballade*.

[page 108] It is going to be like this right up to Christmas, I suspect. I can't remember any story quite like it: each day — actually twice a day, since we're launching stories in the morning and late at night — the partner newspapers are setting something off that ends up being discussed simultaneously in the White House, the Pentagon, the Kremlin, the Elysée Palace, in Delhi, in Caracas and Canberra. It's the first prolonged rolling, real-time global scoop — a vast spillage of information seeping out across the world.

Even in the throes of a carved-out 59 minute session with Michael his piano teacher, he can't help but think of the WikiLeaks reverberations around the world.

[page 108] It feels slightly surrealistic to be plunged straight back into fingering discussions while the WikiLeaks story is pinging round the chancelries and parliaments of the world. But I'm back into the scrum of the story within a blink, so I do my best to shut out all other thoughts for an hour.

Ray Dolan, a professor of neuropsychiatry, helps Alan get over his major concerns about memorizing the score of the *Ballade* by reframing the sheet music pages as a memory cue instead of a crutch.

[page 112] 'What the sheet is, essentially, is a cue and a lot of us need a cue to remember things, just something that will elicit the memory. So the music for you, as it's written and in front of you, is clearly a guide, it's a script, but it's a cue as well. It's eliciting memories that have been laid down.'

Alan asks Dolan if he can explain how one pianist can move us emotionally and another one playing the same notes can leave us cold.

[page 116] 'Well, when you acquire a skill, that skill is enacted out by you making predictions about the consequences of your actions. A lot of motor skills are also of that ilk. You're making predictions of the consequences of your actions. And those predictions, they perfectly line up with the consequences so you don't notice anything. It's only when there's a deviation that you notice. And that deviation in mathematical terms is called "surprise". But I think that's one of the things that good musicians do. They're not aware of this in any technical sense, but a crucial thing is to bring elements of surprise into how you play it. It is my intuition that this element of surprise, or a nuancing of expectations, provides a skilled musician with the core algorithm that is exploited to evoke emotion in an audience.'

From Ronan O'Hora at Guildhall, Alan learns that playing perfectly will not work for certain compositions,

particularly those of Beethoven because he was first composer who poured his own life struggles into his music, beginning with the Eroica Symphony, No. 3. A pianist who doesn't struggle playing Beethoven may be technically precise but will not feel and therefore not evoke the struggle of Beethoven. Part of Alan's struggle is with memorization and Ronan has a suggestion for him about that.

[page 122, O'Hora] 'That's why it's very difficult, I think, for the hyper-virtuosi to play Beethoven convincingly, because you actually need some sense of struggling with one's own kind of limitation. That's actually part of the central utterance of Beethoven.' The Ballade, he thinks, is the nearest you get to this in Chopin — 'where you actually need to feel a player at the edge of their powers'. . . .

Ronan tries to reassure me, telling me I probably don't have a problem with memorizing, just an anxiety about forgetting.

In a live performance, the audience is apt to hear mistakes as expressive gestures. Also in live performances, audiences would often interrupt a great performance for some spontaneous applause, all of which is *gone with the wind* of recorded performances. Music critics will pick out such expressive gestures today, so inured they are by the quasi-perfection of edited recorded music, but audiences will still appreciate the nuances of live performances and ignore the wailing of perfection-minded critics.

[page 187, Alex Ross] 'because recording, because availability to everybody of the best piano playing, of the highest level, has changed what kids strive for. The whole idea of having records which are beautifully engineered and fixed up has changed all of music. . . . There's hardly any room to play a messy performance. That used to be the norm, that used to be perfectly OK, and musicians were able to come to a concert and actually relax and not worry about detail sometimes and let go and play inspired performances in spite of a couple of lapses and I think that doesn't happen any longer.'

When Woody Allen made a movie entitled, "Play It Again, Sam", everyone who saw that movie and had never seen "Casablanca" thought for sure that the line was spoken by Humphrey Bogart, but all Bogie said was "Play it" to Sam, who began playing the famous melody of "As Time Goes By," whose haunting refrain was the harmonic foundation of the entire movie. Alan Rusbridger knew that when he chose "Play It Again" as the eponymous title for his book, but the eponymous quote had never been spoken, not until Woody Allen's movie.

[page 192] Should I ever make a book out of my endeavor with the Ballade, I resolve, I've at least got the title: *Play It Again*. It has two associations apart from the possibility that I might be sitting in front of an old upright piano in Casablanca this time tomorrow night: returning to the piano as an adult, and the fact that it's only by endless repetition that any progress is made. The journalist in me also likes the fact that it's a misquote. Bogart never said it.

When the music room was completed at Blockley, ignominiously named the Fish Cottage, the original brochure from 1978 was with the piano. Its title should forewarn anyone in the market for a piano against even putting a finger on the keys of a Steinway: "See one, Touch one, Play one, Own one." (Page 199)

For myself, my carpentry skills far outpace my music skills with a keyboard instrument. I know how cut wood with precision and fit it together into a seamless whole and a sturdy structure. Alan found himself thinking of his mother taking apart old furniture to re-use its wood and a carpentry metaphor came to his mind.

[page 227] It's clear why this suddenly came to mind. I can now play even the most difficult sections of the Ballade, but I have to remain aware of the weak joints, each fracture, and continue to revisit them until they're mastered — and of course, if I stop focusing on them, they won't just remain weak joints, they'll get weaker. In carpentry each piece you make is built of joints, each one crucial to the integrity of the whole; I

need to remember this with the Ballade. There's no room for imprecision. Each dovetail and dowel matters in exact detail.

What is the one thing that no teacher will ever advise a student when playing a piece? To go for it all, in other words, to take big risks! But Alan attempts to do that for his secondary teacher, Lucy, and finds himself playing it in "a new, vivid way."

[page 238] The next time I play it will be for Michael, and I know I will retreat in speed and in expression. But this has been a little moment of release. And I now understand the imperative to really go for it — that the true impact of the piece lies in the sensation of the pianist risking all. Which is something that a lesson doesn't always encourage.

Much of what happened to Alan during the WikiLeaks and phone hacking fiascos fits in the category of "impossible things", all of which brought to mind for me what the Red Queen said to Alice in Wonderland:

"Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Seemed that everyone except the Queen of England had their phones hacked, even Prince Charles and Camilla.

[page 269] And then it turned out, every member of the royal family, bar the Queen, had been hacked — and that's probably only because she hasn't got a mobile phone. So that was three amazing stories by lunchtime. But, mentioning them to the media editor at six o'clock in the evening, he looked at me blankly and said dismissively, 'Oh yeah, now that seems so long ago, doesn't it?' There had been three equally jaw-slackening developments during the course of the afternoon.

To a journalist, especially one who's editor of the *Guardian*, it seems that people are constantly swimming in and out of your life on any given day. Alan recounts one of those hectic days for us.

[page 321] Today's similarly hectic, but also another one of those days when editing a paper — actually, simply being a journalist — is just one of the most interesting jobs in the world, if only because of the people who swim through your life and the things you discuss. In the morning Martin McGuinness, the former IRA and Sinn Fein leader and now Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister, comes for a cup of coffee. He's just unsuccessfully stood for president in the South and we spend three-quarters of an hour discussing policing, security and the politics of Northern Ireland. As I show him out, I tell him that the next person in — for lunch — is the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. His face brightens and he says what a nice man Williams is and would I send him his regards, which I do. 'Martin McGuinness says he really likes you,' I add. Rowan — beset, as ever, by endless ecclesiastical divisions over gender and sexuality — allows a bushy eyebrow to arch a bit and remarks drily, 'Well at least that's one.'

One of Alan's music teachers is named William, and he offers this wonderful difference between an amateur and professional musician.

[page 328] So, whether you were jet-lagged, or have flu, or really don't like the piano [RJM: the one provided for your performance], or aren't feeling great, you can still play the piece impressively. That is what marks a professional from an amateur.

Then Stephen Hough, who played the *Ballade* at age 12 and is now 50, compared the coda to the process of physically shredding into pieces or ripping apart a horrible love letter from an old flame.

[page 333] When he speaks about the coda, Stephen touches on something new for me, saying: 'When you watch someone playing it, it's not just what you're listening to, it's what you're seeing.' In the coda, the pianist's action is particularly dramatic, quickly going from the bottom of the piano to top, then round the bottom and back up again. 'It's like shredding, ripping up a love letter or something. You know there's something — physically it looks dramatic.'

How was Rusbridger's final performance? His friend Martin popped around for an impromptu dress rehearsal and thought he was marvelous. Rusbridger is reminded of how the theater expert Alan Bennett dealt with weak actors, "Whatever you thought, even if you slept through the whole of the second act, you have to go in there saying it was all marvelous. Marvelous. It was *MARVELOUS*."

[page 349] Suddenly it's over. My hands ended as they began — with thumbs and fingers joined in intoning a unison note of despair (yes, Stephen Hough was right: it is despair). There's a moment of silence and then everyone's on their feet and the girls are rushing towards me for a bear hug of congratulation (their) and utter relief (mine. I can't remember feeling such an instant, immediately physical surge of release.

Yes, indeed, it was marvelous for Alan Rusbridger. Marvelous to have finished learning the *Ballade*. Marvelous to have played it before his friends in the Master Class. Marvelous to have done with it. Marvelous for them to pause for the moment of silence that every audience owes to a performer who has completed a piece. Marvelous to have discovered the difference between an amateur and a professional. Marvelous to enjoy being a true amateur.

