



# Play It Again: An Amateur Against the Impossible

By Alan Rusbridger

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## Play It Again: An Amateur Against the Impossible By Alan Rusbridger

As editor of the *Guardian*, one of the world's foremost newspapers, Alan Rusbridger abides by the relentless twenty-four-hour news cycle. But increasingly in midlife, he feels the gravitational pull of music?especially the piano. He sets himself a formidable challenge: to fluently learn

Chopin's magnificent Ballade No. 1 in G minor, arguably one of the most difficult Romantic compositions in the repertory. With pyrotechnic passages that require feats of memory, dexterity, and power, the piece is one that causes alarm even in battle-hardened concert pianists. He gives himself a year.

Under ideal circumstances, this would have been a daunting task. But the particular year Rusbridger chooses turns out to be one of frenetic intensity. As he writes in his introduction, "Perhaps if I'd known then what else would soon be happening in my day job, I might have had second thoughts. For it would transpire that, at the same time, I would be steering the *Guardian* through one of the most dramatic years in its history." It was a year that began with WikiLeaks' massive dump of state secrets and ended with the *Guardian*'s revelations about widespread phone hacking at *News of the World*. "In between, there were the Japanese tsunami, the Arab Spring, the English riots . . . and the death of Osama Bin Laden," writes Rusbridger. The test would be to "nibble out" twenty minutes per day to do something totally unrelated to the above.

Rusbridger's description of mastering the Ballade is hugely engaging, yet his subject is clearly larger than any one piece of classical music. *Play It Again* deals with focus, discipline, and desire but is, above all, about the sanctity of one's inner life in a world dominated by deadlines and distractions.

*What will you do with your twenty minutes?*

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### Editorial Review

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The editor of *The Guardian* recounts his quest to master a notoriously difficult piano piece in this inspiring book, a tale of perseverance in the face of enormous odds. During a period of more than a year marked by the WikiLeaks and phone-hacking scandal stories, amateur musician Rusbridger carves out the time in his demanding schedule to learn Chopin's "Ballade No. 1 in G minor." With great detail, down to the fingering of the piece, the series of diary entries will interest the musically minded most strongly, although it's possible for nonmusicians to comprehend. Rusbridger speaks to experts and enthusiasts in several different fields to deepen his understanding of the piece and the impact of making music on the brain. Like the Chopin piece, reading this account requires dedication but holds rewards for those who make the effort. As his deadline looms, the drama mounts. Can he master the Ballade and answer his questions about the quest: Is there time for such an endeavor, or is it too late to try? --Bridget Thoreson

#### Review

"This wonderfully illuminating and entertaining chronicle shows Mr. Rusbridger's incredible dedication and energy in pursuing the mastery of an iconic Chopin piano work. He is an amateur of the piano in the way that we all should be--he truly loves the music and the instrument. I am inspired by his example." ?Emanuel Ax

"This is not only the diary of a sixteen-month challenge but also an extended essay on beauty, memory, and performance; on time and how we use it; on work and what we do it for. A wonderful book." ?Sarah Bakewell, author of *How to Live: or, A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*

"Music is not just for professionals. It is a universal art form--to be treasured, shared, and enjoyed by amateurs. *Play It Again* is the inspiring story of how an exceptionally busy editor makes the time in his life for the piano--and one piece in particular, the fearsomely difficult Chopin G minor Ballade No. 1. If it encourages others to find the space for music, I, for one, would be extremely happy." ?Daniel Barenboim

"This captivating book masquerades as the journal of a magnificent obsession, but you soon realize that it's wider-ranging than that, and far more endearing. The story pivots on a feeling that many of us share: a deep and abiding love of music coupled with a daydreamer's challenge to master one truly great work. With an exegetical discussion of Chopin's masterpiece, Alan Rusbridger insists we step inside the music with him and consider the score with the probing mind of a dedicated amateur. A remarkable tour de force." ?Thad Carhart, author of *The Piano Shop on the Left Bank*

"In this dazzling, dizzying memoir, one of the world's leading newspaper editors tells of learning to play Chopin's formidable Ballade No. 1 in G minor against a backdrop of phone hacking and WikiLeaks espionage. The day-to-day counterpoint of piano practice and breaking news is a compositional feat in itself: you have the impression of a wide-awake, fearless mind." ?Alex Ross, author of *The Rest Is Noise*

#### About the Author

**Alan Rusbridger** has been the editor of the *Guardian* since 1995. Born in Northern Rhodesia, he was educated at the University of Cambridge and lives in London.

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