

A Year with Chopin

Jessica Duchon finds Alan Rusbridger's piano diary a rewarding read



PLAY IT AGAIN:

An Amateur Against the Impossible

Alan Rusbridger

Jonathan Cape
ISBN 978-0-224-9-377-4 (hb) 403pp
BBC Music Direct £18.99

You'd think the editor of *The Guardian* would have enough to worry about without also trying to tackle one of Chopin's most difficult pieces. Alan Rusbridger spent a year dealing with WikiLeaks, the Leveson Inquiry and media meltdown, yet decided to learn to play – to performance standard – the Ballade No.1 in G minor. Then he wrote a book about it.

Any amateur musician will find bells ringing through Rusbridger's

The Chopin Ballade looms as a kind of eternal presence

eloquent pages: the challenges of finding the time, the teachers, the right way to practise. But alongside the party conferences, the phone hacking scandal and meetings with Julian Assange, the Chopin Ballade looms as a kind of eternal presence: both a mathematical puzzle and the climbing of a musical Matterhorn, always something miraculous.

As Rusbridger progresses through passages we come to recognise as 'death trapeze' and 'squashed flies',



DAILY RITUAL:
Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger at his piano

it becomes akin to spiritual practice; he starts his day with 20 minutes at the piano as others might with yoga or meditation. The Chopin becomes a tantalising entity that tempts him on to better himself. And this makes the book rewarding at a deeper level than its already enticing surface.

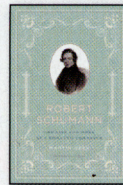
Life as a top newspaper editor is fascinating in its own right and Rusbridger makes us privy to some tasty revelations – not just in politics and media, but music, too. His privileged position, dining

with the great and good, can pay startling dividends for his readers.

Try this: 'He's a great, great pianist, a towering intellect and a wonderful humanist. But he f*cks up pianos!' That was Daniel Barenboim describing Alfred Brendel.

Finally, the book provides the complete score of the Ballade, passage by passage, with precise annotations gleaned from Murray Perahia, Stephen Hough, Alfred Brendel and more. We should all be so lucky. ★★★★★

BOOKS REVIEWS



ROBERT SCHUMANN:
The Life and Work of a Romantic Composer

Martin Geck
(translation: Stewart Spencer)

University of Chicago Press
ISBN 13 978-0-226-28469-9 (hb) 280pp
BBC Music Direct £22.50

Everyone writes about Schumann from a different standpoint. Entire books have been based on the theory that he had syphilis, while others – Martin Geck's new tract included – dismiss the idea out of hand.

Schumann's aesthetics are Geck's primary and most satisfying focus: life and work emerge as indivisible, for that was how Schumann himself saw it. 'I am affected by everything that happens in the world: politics, literature, people... I think about everything in my own way, and this then seeks to vent itself and find an outlet through music,' he wrote. His lively intellect bounces off the page, together with the inner pathways that make his imaginary world, his deeper self and his music inextricable.

The nuanced, perceptive way in which Geck draws these confluences makes this a rewarding read. He is strong on Schumann's literary inspirations, with much detail about the writings of Jean Paul and the double-edged swords of Heinrich Heine. Schumann's journalism is also under the spotlight: as Geck writes, 'It is fascinating to watch Schumann build up a small empire with his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* and how he fused reality and vision, poetry and politics, public and private concerns, and artistic ideals and self-promotion to create a miniature total artwork.'

Issues that preoccupy other biographers – Schumann's marriage to Clara Wieck, the effect of the young Brahms, the mental breakdown – are kept in perspective. Yet his fate feels all the more tragic as the confidence and idealism of his young years disintegrates. Should Geck rubbish the syphilis theory so swiftly? John Worthen's biography makes a strong case for the opposite. And I'm dubious about the use of the term 'elitist' to describe Schumann's late works. The socio-political connotations of this word from the 1980s-90s feels out of place imposed upon music of the 1850s that is as rich as anything its composer ever dreamed up. *Jessica Duchon* ★★★★★

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