

# What I did on my holidays

Piano camp is not for softies. Grown men have cracked. Can Alan Rusbridger stay the course?

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'I prefer the life of the amateur' ... Alan Rusbridger at the piano. Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Surrounded by old furniture, ping-pong bats and half-used cans of paint in the garage of a farmhouse in rural France, a former Falklands war pilot is hammering out a frenetic passage of early Schumann. Walk around to the front of the building and the music elides into Rachmaninov. The marketing director of an international drinks company is rather effortlessly ambling through the Second Piano Concerto. Move into the kitchen of this farmhouse in the Lot valley and it's now Liszt, wafting through from the main room, where a retired stockbroker is getting to grips with a late Sonetto del Petrarca.

Welcome to piano camp. Like characters from a musical Big Brother, nine strangers have been thrown together for a week of intensive proximity. For the next six days we will study, play, eat and swim together. Thankfully, there is as yet no Diary Room nor the means to vote each other off.

The strangers are all amateurs, though in at least three cases the distinction between the feats they can manage on the keyboard and that of an accomplished professional pianist is pretty negligible.

Later in the week, the former pilot will knock off a near flawless performance of Beethoven's enormous Diabelli variations - a 55-minute monster of a piece many sensible concert performers avoid. On other evenings, the marketing director will play all of Brahms's Op76 Klavierstucke, and a retired publisher will sparkle her way through Ravel's fearsome Jeux d'Eau without a hint of nerves or even wrong notes.

Piano camp is not for musical softies. On a previous course, there was a Ferrari-driving doctor. Let's call him Brian. On day one he staggered his way through a piece of Bartok that was PhD stuff when he was nearer GCSE. The poor man never recovered. To his credit, he remained for the rest of the course, but nothing on earth would persuade him back to the keyboard. This was a man who had performed countless acts of surgery under extraordinary pressure, who drove a fast motorbike and skied on black runs.

We should pause to deconstruct the word amateur. "A century ago," writes DJ Taylor in his recent book about sporting Corinthians, "'amateur' was a compliment to someone who played a game simply for the love of it. A hundred years later, it is a by-word for cack-handed incompetence."

The same point is made by the late American literary critic Wayne Booth, who wrote a book about his lifelong love of playing the cello. He intended his book to be "a celebration of what it means to do something worth doing for the sheer love of doing it, with no thought of future pay-off - in a world where you can't even survive unless you do some thinking about payoff".

He notes two conventional dictionary definitions of amateur:

1. "One who practises an art or science or sport for his own pleasure, rather than as a profession."
2. "One who does something without professional skill or ease."

Neither definition quite works for Booth. He, like me, knew plenty of amateurs who played with quasi-professional skill or ease. And, after nearly 50 years of playing the cello for the love of it, he could never quite accept that he was doing it just for pleasure.

"Over the years all that playing has come to feel less and less like a mere addendum to life, a pastime, a hobby, and more and more like something beyond even an added luxury; it's now a necessity."

Booth draws a further distinction between "amateurism" and recreation. "Amateurism not only entails practice, even what might be called labouring: it lands us in aspirations that can produce a sense of failure."

The amateurs who assembled in the Lot valley this summer were not hobbyists. They had signed up for a daily routine that involved several hours of practice, masterclasses and recitals, plus a bit of midnight musical messing around for those still with spare energy.

There were three virtual professionals - in the sense of all-round accomplishment in technique and musicality: David, Howard and Christabel. Then there was Jenny, a softly spoken Suzuki-method piano teacher from Cambridge, and Sue, a retired primary school teacher from south London. Stuart, the former stockbroker, believed in attempting the Everest of the western musical canon, whereas Jimmy, a Cambridge philosopher, was more drawn to miniature masterpieces. And then there was me and my Guardian colleague, Martin, who had opted to play four-hand duets on the principle that it's twice the fun and half the pressure.

The courses are the inspiration of a Manchester-based plastic surgeon (and amateur flautist and pianist), Anne Brain. Now in her ninth year of running them (recently blossoming into two summer courses a year), she adopts the same formula each time. A tutor - generally from one of the British musical conservatoires - is hired to conduct a daily three-and-a-half-hour masterclass and give two recitals. The pupils each have three or four lessons. The better ones give individual recitals during the week and everyone takes part in an end-of-week concert.

And then there is the practice. A very detailed rota of pianos, times and names is very publicly on display in the kitchen - carrying with it the strong implication that everyone will want to spend a further two or three hours a day polishing their show pieces and working on technique. There's a name-and-shame element: anyone planning to slope off for a siesta or a spot of wine-tasting is expected to signal as much by scrubbing their slot from the rota, thereby freeing the piano for a true keeno.

If that all sounds a little like hard work for a supposed holiday, well, I suppose it is. But there were very few no-shows for the practice slots (the earliest started before breakfast at 8am), which suggests an amateur thirst for piano-playing that, during the course of everyday life, is not remotely slaked.

Our tutor for the week was Richard McMahon, head of keyboard studies at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. A distinguished recitalist and recording artist, he spends most of his life teaching really good pianists intent on making a career in the business. Which raises

the question of why on earth he would want to spend any of his hard-earned rest in the company of amateurs who, no matter how talented, had no future in professional music-making.

But, if he felt any frustration at our efforts, Richard concealed it well. Whatever the standard of playing, he contrived to keep a straight face, and responded with calm, considered and always helpful points on technical challenges or general musicianship.

Another regular course-attender, the retired theatre critic Irving Wardle, once wrote of the Lot masterclasses that they "outlawed the concept of impossibility" (apropos the pianist Louis Kentner observing that there was no such thing as a difficult piece: "A piece is either easy or impossible - the bridge between the two is practice.") Practice is certainly most of the answer, but so is having a patient tutor like Richard, who will isolate a technical problem and then find a pragmatic solution. More than once he drew comparisons between the craft of playing the piano and cabinet-making.

Just as working in wood requires measurement, good tools, preparation and precision, so Richard's advice was about fingering, passage work, the use of the pedal. The fingers must go to the base of the notes. Keep the last finger joint firm. "If you use the fifth finger in octaves you have to move in on the keys, so use the fourth finger on the black notes." And so on: the craft of music-making.

The only time Richard ever showed any impatience was at the frequent habit amateur pianists have of referring to the way a piece sounds on a particular recording they have at home. He was much more interested in what the amateur pianist had to bring to a piece, than in anyone aping the playing of a professional.

"I get so much out of these courses," he said over dinner one night. "Sometimes an amateur performance can be a bit raw. But these are players who are playing because they love the music and they love playing the piano. They have total commitment to a particular piece. And sometimes they find things in the music which more technically accomplished musicians miss."

I'm inclined to believe him. My little chamber group in London (with me on clarinet rather than piano) has recently expanded to play the Schubert octet a couple of times, drafting in one or two professional players to help us out.

The professionals could, of course, play the work with colleagues about 10 times our standard. But, equally, many professional musicians seldom get to play any chamber music once they reach a certain point in their career. They may be doing a lot of lucrative session work, or teaching to help ends meet; or they may simply have run out of musical energy after a full week of rehearsing, travelling and performing. There's not an enormous market for chamber concerts and these people have to earn a living.

And then there's that tired, seen-it-all cynicism about the business, which affects a surprising number of professionals. So, actually, sit one of them down with a glass of wine, a towering piece of music and a bunch of friends who are simply there for the love of it, and you can often see the jaded edges disappear and a forgotten passion bubble to the surface.

Sure, we make lots of mistakes and don't always play in tune. But then there's no pressure on the professional to turn in a note-perfect performance. Something more relaxed, more creative and experimental can suddenly emerge.

You could see it each night in the Lot as, after dinner in a nearby restaurant, several of the party would head back to the house, notwithstanding that we'd already packed in six or seven hours of music.

A bottle of Cognac would be produced and an ever-changing combination of pianists would take turns at two pianos to read through the concerto repertoire. Often the best place to

appreciate these late-night jams was from the adjacent swimming pool. One night, I floated on my back, gazed at the stars and listened to Richard and Howard, the drinks marketing director, impressively read their way through Beethoven's Emperor concerto at 1am.

Most of the pianists on the course regretted they had left it a little late in life to resume the instrument (most had learned as children). Most had busy other lives, but I suspect they shared Wayne Booth's conviction that music was now more a necessity than a luxury.

All of which raises interesting questions about the increasing compulsion towards creativity that so many people feel, as they move from what Jung regarded as the "natural" phase of life (childhood and early adulthood) to a "cultural" phase - a process he described as "individuation". You sensed in more than one of us a feeling of reconnection with important parts of ourselves that had been long forgotten or suppressed.

Churchill found it in watercolours and oils, which he discovered in his middle years and which he celebrated in a book with the slightly belittling title *Painting As a Pastime*.

And then there's the most famous amateur pianist of them all, Condi Rice, who manages to fit in regular quintet sessions with friends while running the world. Asked recently by the New York Times if she found it relaxing she responded: "It's not exactly relaxing if you are struggling to play Brahms. But it is transporting. When you're playing, there is only room for Brahms or Shostakovich. It's the time I'm most away from myself, and I treasure it."

Booth relished his amateuring so much that he rather disapproved of Churchill describing the value of painting purely in utilitarian terms - the respite it afforded him from the more important business of world affairs. I suspect he would sniff a similar motive - escapism - in the US secretary of state, though even he might have thought it a mistake for Rice to be pictured playing Brahms in Kuala Lumpur when she should have been sorting out Lebanon.

But who's to say the utilitarian argument has no value? One or two Churchill biographers believe his mid-life discovery of painting rescued his sanity from the black depressions he suffered after the fiasco of Gallipoli. And one day soon, if they can't already, neuroscientists will be able to analyse the chemical changes that help transport Condi away from her day job - and whether, or in what respects, her political brain works differently (or better?) after the musical brain has been exercised.

Aside from listening to too many recordings, the worst mistake amateurs make is playing overambitious pieces. Much better to perfect a Bach prelude or a Schubert dance than murder a late Beethoven sonata. It's a fault we share with amateur golfers, most of whom would rather be brought to their knees by a championship links than triumph over the local patch of parkland.

The (very professional) chamber pianist Susan Tomes laments the decline in amateur music-making in her new book, *A Musician's Alphabet*. "The more people lose their collective memory of amateur music-making, the more they feel respectfully alienated from professionals such as us. The knowledge that these masterpieces are shared by all music lovers is gradually being replaced by a feeling that they belong to the experts."

Most amateurs would happily sacrifice their back molars to play like professionals. I'm not so sure. Of course, I'd love to conquer the Hammerklavier sonata as totally as Andras Schiff (on recent Wigmore Hall form). But for every Schiff, there are perhaps 5,000 pretty good professional pianists, not quite making a living, with not quite total mastery over their motor functions, memory and nerves. Some come to terms with it. In others you can sense the lifelong tinge of disappointment.

All in all, I think I prefer the life of the amateur. Always travelling, never arriving, frustration balanced by hope and fantasy. And all the time doing it for the simple love of it, and for no other reason.