

Piano dreams

*Challenging but supportive, Paul Roberts' courses are a lifeline to amateur pianists.
Michael Church relearns how to play*

Ever since a beaten-up honky-tonk came through our front door, I have been mad about the piano. I took lessons from an endearingly old-school martinet, who got me through the grades; most of my teenage spare time was spent playing through armfuls of Bach, Chopin, Schumann and Beethoven collected weekly from our local public library. Unlike a much-envied coeval, I was not a natural player: I just wanted to inhabit the world opened up by those sturdy tomes. I stopped taking lessons when A-level pressures squeezed out practice-time for Grade 8, but I never stopped playing: over the next 45 years I acquired – and reinforced with repetition – some very bad habits. I would spend months on a piece, to a point where I was sick of it but still could not play it: I systematically murdered the most beautiful things ever composed. My job as a critic reminded me daily what real pianism is, and did nothing for my confidence. My own pianism was like a garden grown wild.

Reaching the magic age of 65, I suddenly realised I must take myself in hand. You only get one life, your fingers may not stay un-arthritic forever, and if I was ever to play Beethoven and Chopin decently, quick action was required. I bought a Grotrian-Steinweg as a self-inducement, and started taking lessons in an attempt to become worthy of it. My first discovery was that my hands had lost their youthful elasticity: I kept straining fingers and thumbs through over-practice. My second discovery was that I could get round the keyboard with more assurance than my teenage self ever could: age brings practical wisdom. I picked up virtually where I had left off at 16, and the intervening half-century was obliterated.

But if I was to progress at the speed I wanted, my intermittent lessons (with a good teacher) needed beefing up with something more radical; a 48-hour residential course run by the concert pianist (and Debussy authority) Paul Roberts sounded as if it might fit the bill. Thus it is that I find myself warily studying my fellow-students round the break-

fast table, one Saturday at his house in Sussex. A brilliantly-played Chopin scherzo wafts down from the music-room: 'That's just Ron trying to intimidate us,' mutters one man into his muesli, to general amusement. But it certainly intimidates me. I have rashly typed Ron as an ordinary, hard-bitten Yank, but now he makes me want to flee.

Fear, I soon realise, is what almost everyone feels on induction into this game. David, a novelist in his fifties, says he has despaired of ever being able to play for an audience without getting the shakes, but he is still an addictive attendee at the courses which Paul Roberts and his wife Jenny run, both here and on a grander scale in a chateau in the south of France. In fact, almost everybody round the table is an addictive attendee: I have stumbled into a secret society. With varying degrees of pianistic competence, they all share a burning desire to improve in their extra-curricular obsession. Linda, 57, had been for several years the senior regulatory doctor in Blair's NHS, but has opted for a less stressful role which gives her

more time for the piano; Jonathan, 58, has retired early from his job as a pathologist for the same reason. James, 53, is a BBC lawyer, and Alan, 48, is a psychoanalyst whose real ambition is to play Schubert's last great sonata. Kyoko, 42, hated the piano lessons she was coerced into (in common with most middle-class Japanese girls of her generation), but she is now doggedly pushing towards her diploma. Ron, 66, was offered a place at the Juilliard as a teenager; he opted instead for a medical career specialising in transplant and trauma, but has managed to combine that with a quasi-professional career as a pianist. Are there any parallels between musical performance and emergency medicine, I ask him. Very much so, he replies. Connecting with patients in stressful situations, and connecting with an audience, both demand a rapid intuitive and practical response.

As the new boy, I am nearing my moment of truth with the Beethoven pieces I have brought: I will soon know whether I am a player of sorts, or a



Inspirational: Paul Roberts puts Michael Church through his paces

PAUL ROBERTS' PIANO COURSES

total no-hoper, and I have taken a mild beta-blocker to improve my chances. The allegro of Beethoven's second sonata may not have many notes, but it is full of irregular scales and arpeggios, like somersaults on a trapeze. My first canter through is recognisable if rough, but my second is a total disaster: each jump-and-run looms like a black void without hand-holds, and the more I repeat it, the less able I am to find the notes, let alone play them. Mortification would be an understatement: I sense waves of sympathy from the other players who have all – apart from the seemingly armour-plated Ron – trodden this miserable path before.


Convinced I am a no-hoper – I had spent several weeks practising this piece – I am shocked to be told there are some good things in my performance, and I have them singled out for praise. And as the others take turns to play, it becomes clear that Roberts' approach is anything but doctrinaire: he focuses first on each player's positive points, then suggests ways of dealing with problems. He gives advice to James on how to make the melody sing in Schubert's G flat Impromptu, to Linda on how to clarify the colours in Debussy's *Cathédrale engloutie*, and to Jonathan on the varieties of pedalling suitable for Chopin, and his advice is immediately put into effect. (Ron merely gets added refinements to his already fine performances.) I notice that while I have brought a purely technical challenge, the others have brought pieces where expressivity is the challenge. On the second day, my other Beethoven allegro – the charming Opus 14 No 2, which I brought as a fall-back in case I come to grief – saves my life. I get through it in reasonable order, make it sing, and am shown how to deconstruct, and rebuild from scratch, the troublesome middle section. By now the atmosphere – supportive rather than intimidating – has dissolved my paranoia.

For that is what our self-destructive expectations often amount to. Jonathan has come back to 'undo an unhappy experience' he had last time round, and triumphantly does so. When psychoanalyst Alan flawlessly delivers the Chopin nocturne with which he had crashed in flames last summer, people are visibly moved. Asked how he managed this transformation, he gives the sort of reply you might expect from one of his kind: first he took it into analysis, then he deconstructed it, then he found people to play his new version to, until the phobia was erased, and a beautiful performance could result.

Castigate all this as supreme self-indulgence if you will – and the en famille context is unquestionably a bonus – but that is not how it feels, nor what it is. Linda's suddenly-impassioned observation to me that these sessions are 'about sharing the good things in humanity' rings true: they are about communality and self-knowledge, as well as about music. The philosophy on which Roberts has based his summer school – of which these weekend courses are a spin-off – is the one which succeeds so brilliantly in Dartington, where conservatoire students work alongside amateurs, with both groups deriving benefit from the encounter.

A boyish 59, Roberts is an inspirational teacher, who brings his musical learning to bear with brilliantly illuminating effect: I came away from this course with a rich haul of insights, and several practice strategies. With professorships at both the Guildhall and the Royal Northern College of Music, and with a thriving practice in America, Roberts is covering the waterfront as a teacher, while also maintaining his recital career. He leapt briefly to national fame two years ago by tutoring Diane Abbott MP for the BBC documentary *Play It Again* – she had boldly chosen to take her first pianistic steps in a painfully public way. She came to grief in the climactic concert, with Roberts having to add the left hand, but felt in no way diminished by the experience. That may be due in part to his subtly supportive approach, but it must also reflect the nature of the process, which a weekend like this delivers with great intensity: a benign and life-enhancing voyage of discovery.

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Application forms and further details from:

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