

Don't Pound on the Piano

When I was in college, one of my piano projects was Moussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition". The first movement of this piece is a grand chorale—wall-to-wall 10-12 note chords, a real fistful.

One day, right before my lesson, I was slugging through this swamp of notes when my teacher walked in. "Richard, please," he said, "stop pounding on the piano!"

I took immediate offense at this phraseology; after all I was 25 years old, a professional musician—I didn't ever POUND on the piano!

My teacher immediately apologized, and then said, "Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but, to me, whenever somebody plays two notes in a row at the same dynamic, it sounds like pounding."

This might very well be the best music lesson I ever got. The idea that music is always going toward you or away from you, has never been a new idea to me—I have always intuitively understood this; but the idea, that even casual practice should engage the highest sensitivities of musical intelligence, inspired me to put all my music-making, especially repetitive practice, on a higher intensity level. This insight has consistently enabled me to transcend limitations in myself, and to teach other people how to transcend the many largely self-imposed limitations in themselves.