

The Perils of (pianistic) *Pianissimo*  
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I Is it really so tricky to play the piano softly? What are these “perils”?

- Left to our own devices, if exhorted to “play it softer this time!” and not given any technical guidance, we will tend to simply pull back physically, play “less”
- Playing “less,” i.e. holding back and retreating from the keys, *doesn't* feel good (causes tension in neck and shoulders, etc.)
- When we retreat, we use less of the body and our energy stops flowing. This causes us to lose control of notes. Some notes will blurt out, others will (maddeningly!) not speak at all.
- Playing “less” means lack of support of each finger; thus fingering patterns can become confused and shaky, even if they’ve been practiced a lot.
- Self-consciousness in students (“was that soft enough?”). If the answer is NO, guilt sets in.
- A lot of (too much?) emphasis is often placed on “dynamic contrast” by the judges in student festivals. (“Very nice, dear, now if you could JUST make even more dynamic contrast!”) It’s such an easy comment for judges to fall back on.
- Playing “less” leads to colorless *pianissimo* tone. But why should soft sounds be colorless?
- When we’re nervous on stage, the little notes (if we’ve always practiced them lightly) will be the first to go. They simply weren’t learned robustly enough. But we may end up blaming ourselves, or our nerves, instead of rethinking our approach to playing soft dynamics.
- Because playing “less” is frustrating, unreliable, and doesn’t feel or sound very good, it can cause the fun to go out of playing. This is far too high a price to pay for “dynamic contrast.”

II What factors contribute to the problem?

- Manipulating, micromanaging and holding back – all these can lead to physical tension
- Fighting gravity (hovering over the keys) is very tiring
- Every piano is different (so if our *piano* technique is incomplete, there’s no telling what – if anything – will come out)

III How can we approach *pianissimos* in a healthy way, and achieve even more dynamic control? What principles can we apply?

- First, “Make Friends with the Notes” – i.e. regardless of the dynamic, practice everything big, relaxed, natural and healthy, as loud as you like, with enjoyment. Until it all feels great. After this, almost anything is possible and easy (including the softest and subtlest *pianissimos*).
- “Technique = Making a Physical Commitment to Every Note” – Leopold Mittman
- Keep a clear separation between Process and Product; in other words, it’s OK to practice *without musicality* by choice; in fact, this is a practicing “superpower.”

#### IV Other helpful concepts:

- Dynamics are all “relative” anyway (How soft is soft? Think of projecting in a hall)
- Quality of tone should not be sacrificed; it speaks volumes, and IS the music
- Trust that your body can do great things in ways your mind may not be able to grasp. Just make the body comfortable and free – and let it surprise you! This is one of the great joys of performing

#### V Implications for teaching:

- Don’t ask for dynamics in the early stages of learning. Have students play everything at the same dynamic at first (bring in the piece “under construction”). Only introduce dynamics after thorough, comfortable technique has been established in each hand – and then do the quiet dynamics no more than **half** the time in practice.

Pianist **WILLIAM WESTNEY** was the top piano prizewinner of the Geneva International Competition, and he appeared thereafter as soloist with such major orchestras as l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and the Houston, San Antonio and New Haven Symphonies.

During Fulbright study in Italy he was the only American winner in auditions held by *Radiotelevisione Italiana*. He has given solo recitals on four continents, including appearances at New York's Lincoln Center a U.S. State Department tour of Italy. His playing has been described by reviewers as “riveting” (*N.Y. Post*) and “refreshing” (*Straits Times*, Singapore).

An internationally noted educator, William Westney is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Texas Tech University, where he received the university’s highest teaching honors. His groundbreaking “Un-Master Class” performance workshops were described as “fascinating” in a featured *New York Times* article. They have been given hundreds of times at conservatories around the world, including the Central Conservatory (Beijing), Sibelius Academy (Helsinki), Royal Danish Academy (Copenhagen) and the Juilliard School (NY).

His first book, *The Perfect Wrong Note*, was published by Amadeus Press in 2003 to critical acclaim and became an international bestseller. Westney’s new book, *Eros at the Piano: The Life-Energy of Classical Music* will be released by Rowman & Littlefield in July 2023. It includes further insight on the “perils of *pianissimo*” and many related topics.