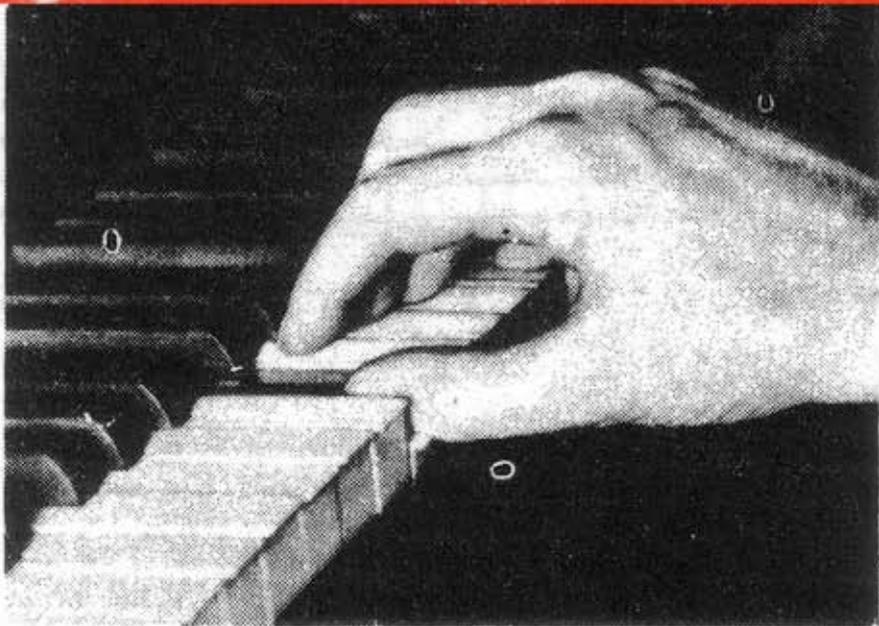


John Thompson's Modern Course For The Piano The Second Grade Book



In an episode of NPR's "Piano Jazz" with host Marian McPartland, guest Teddy Wilson explains that concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz would often perform Robert Schumann's composition "Träumerei" in his recitals. "Träumerei" ("Dreaming") is from "Kinderszenen" ("Scenes from Childhood"), and Schumann composed it about childhood and for young pianists. Horowitz often took pieces that other players would turn their noses up to and turned them into masterpieces, and such was the case with "Träumerei". Hearing this convinced me that it was worthwhile to learn "John Thompson's Modern Course For The Piano The Second Grade Book".

The goal for this project was to record every piece in the book with no mistakes, good interpretation (like Horowitz), and at its recommended tempo. What I initially thought would only take a few weeks ended up taking over a year. At the end there were hundreds of recordings and hours of outtakes.

Throughout this process, the mechanical nature of playing classical music was brought to mind, where the bare minimum is to play all the correct notes at the correct time—a process that can be very frustrating. Often, I began playing a piece very slowly and increased the tempo incrementally by two bpm at a time. I probably played the song Jocularly, for example, several hundred times. And even though I ended up performing the piece at a decent tempo with decent phrasing, there are still a few moments where I dragged the rhythm or pressed the keys too strongly or too softly.

In a way, this is the inverse of the process used by composer Conlon Nancarrow, who composed music for mechanical player pianos. Through a tedious process of measuring and punching slots into piano rolls, he constructed extremely

detailed and complex musical experiments. These were often beyond the capability of any single human pianist. Conlon devoted time to create instructions to be executed by a machine, but me and anyone else who has ever learned to read sheet music devoted time to mechanically translated instructions into actions.

This is along the lines of a project by artist Christo Allegra, who created a set of one-hundred drawings by acting as a human printer. For each drawing, he plotted over two-hundred nodes and lines in silver ink on black paper by following commands from a computer he programmed. Later, at an exhibition of his drawings, he asked visitors to choose their favorite drawings out of the set. Their choices assigned aesthetic value into work that was generated through a strict procedural framework.

This piano project is similar, but instead of creating drawings, I have created audio recordings. We both produced work with our hands by following strict instructions, which has a high probability for error, variation, and aesthetics.

This set of recordings should be considered a process instead of an end result. Ideally, it would be listened to from beginning to end so that some sense of progression can be noticed, though some recordings may stand out as favorites. In between each track there are hours, days, and sometimes months where I practiced piano, went to school, worked on other projects, and simply did other things. Even with all this multi-tasking, I never forgot that I had to complete my John Thompson project.

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