

A must-read for everyone who is
considering a piano purchase now or
in the future

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A couple of months ago, I got a call from a friend wanting to know if I'd like to go guitar shopping. "Heck yeah," I said, and we spent most of a Saturday afternoon having a bunch of fun, playing some great instruments, and making the lives of local guitar sales personnel miserable. Late in the day, my friend returned to one of the stores and bought a gorgeous, handmade guitar. It wasn't cheap, but both of us thought it well worth the money. I'm sure my friend slept with it that night.

Understand, spending a day like this would not be at all unusual for guitar lovers. All of them I know, amateurs and professionals alike, look forward to instrument shopping. We read about them, subscribe to guitar magazines, talk about them. We get a little geeky about it, now that I come to think of it, but it's just the way we are.

I mention this because, in my experience, people don't seem to feel the same way when it comes to shopping for a piano.

I've often seen customers come into a piano store in a bad mood and remain that way for most of the time they're there. They'll look around, ask hardly any questions, plunk on a few notes, write down some prices and leave with a pained look on their face. Then, they'll come back to the store six months later *and do the same thing all over again*, most of the time in a worse mood than the first time they came in. Some of them (maybe *most* of them) never buy *anything* to my knowledge. For years I'd watch this and wonder, "what's the deal here?" Why was something that should be quite enjoyable, perceived as such a pain?

Finally, I just started asking them, "You've been in three times in the last year and still haven't bought anything. Do you mind if I ask why?" From those who would actually give me an answer, the response was practically universal: *they didn't feel like they knew enough to make an informed decision*. They were bombarded with complicated, often conflicting, claims from not only the salespeople, but from friends and teachers as well. It was almost impossible for them to separate piano facts from piano myth or hype. Suddenly, it all became clear to me: For most people, ***the piano is a mystery***.

You see, the people actually doing the purchasing often aren't going play the piano themselves. I've found that the typical person you'll see shopping in a piano store on any given day is a parent buying for a child just starting out, or a spouse buying for a spouse (usually, a husband buying for his wife).

More importantly, I believe—even if the purchaser is an experienced player, the relationship between piano and pianist is very different than the relationship between the guitar and guitarist, or the tuba and the, uh... well, whatever you call someone who plays a tuba (I'm pretty sure it's not "tubist").

Take my guitar-playing friend, for example. When he shops for a new guitar, he's looking at something he's already very familiar with. He's played the guitar since he was a kid. He changes his guitar's strings himself and adjusts the instruments to some extent. He's even taken one or two apart to see what makes them tick. The guitar *isn't* a mystery to him; and the same could be said for the folks that play almost any instrument you can

think of, except for *pianists*, that is.

Few pianists ever bother to explore the instrument's "mysterious" inner workings. If you were to open a piano's lid and ask 95% of piano players to name just five of the parts inside, they'd be unable to do it. If a pencil is accidentally dropped into their piano, the average pianist hasn't the foggiest idea of how to get it out. This isn't a criticism; it's just the way things are. Pianos are complicated instruments and learning to tune and service them takes more time than most musicians are willing to allocate.

The relationship could be compared more to the one most people have with their automobile—if it needs servicing or repair, most of us don't even bother raising the hood. We just take it to the garage. We certainly know how to drive it, but we don't know much about how it works. Imagine how confusing it would be to shop for an automobile if we didn't even know how to drive it!

When they find themselves standing in a piano store, most people are a ball of confusion. All the pianos have black and white keys; the cabinets look similar. To the untrained ear, they seem to sound about the same. Yet, two pianos of similar size can be separated by *thousands* of dollars. *What the heck's the difference?* It can be intimidating and *that's* why people think shopping for a piano is so unpleasant.

In a similar set of circumstances, I guess I'd be in a bad mood too.

So, I've decided to try and de-mystify the piano. As I mentioned before, I've been associated with the piano industry for many years. I began selling musical instruments, primarily pianos, about thirty years ago. Although it's been several years since I was a piano salesman, today, I own a company that provides marketing services to some of the most well known piano companies in the world and I'm still very involved and familiar with the internal workings of the piano industry. In my career, I've worked with some of the world's greatest pianists, piano technicians, piano manufacturers and piano sales professionals. I've lectured and written numerous articles on the subject and I believe, without exaggerating, I can claim to be an expert on the piano, its construction and the way the instrument is marketed. I'd like to share some of that expertise with you.

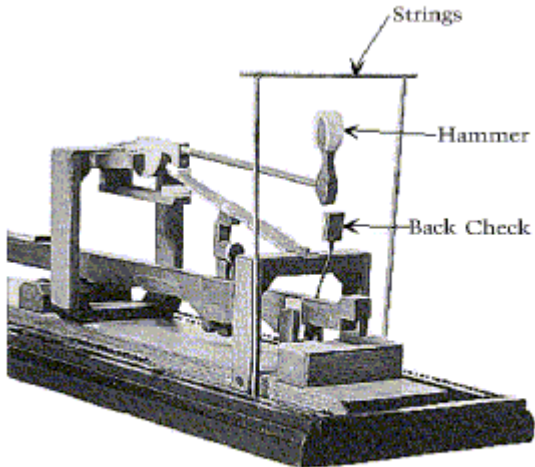
My aim is to make it short and sweet with this. I'm not out to provide a college credit course. I'd just like to give you enough information to put most of what you'll hear about pianos into perspective and help you to make a better decision when it's time for you to purchase a piano.

So, let's get started, shall we?

First, a short history lesson on the piano. Now, don't start cringing; it will be short and, I promise, you'll see why it's important. So, don't skip over it.

In the Beginning

Bertolomeo Cristofori, an Italian harpsichord maker, invented the piano in the early 1700's. But a great deal of the piano—its basic shape, string arrangement and keyboard layout had already been invented long before that time. They came directly from the harpsichord. What Cristofori really invented was the piano's playing mechanism, or *action*.



Reproduction of the action of one key in a piano made by Bartolomeo Cristofori in 1720

Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Crosby Brown Collection of musical instruments, 1889.

Cristofori was one of the finest harpsichord makers in the world, but he realized the instrument had a basic problem—it just didn't make enough sound. The harpsichord's action produced sound from a *quill* that plucked the strings. The plucking force couldn't be significantly varied, so the harpsichord could only be played at a single, relatively low, volume level. This was a serious drawback for a harpsichordist. The sound of a harpsichord is very nice, but it was hard to express a wide range of emotion on one. No matter how hard or soft it was played, a harpsichord always sounded pretty much the same.

Cristofori's new invention, the piano (or **Pianoforte**, as it was called then) utilized an action with *hammers* that struck the strings. This gave the piano significantly more volume than a harpsichord when the keys were pushed with force. Or, conversely, it could be played softly



Harpsichord, Flemish, Makers Joannes Couchet, c. 1650
Case decorated with carving and gilt gesso work.

Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889.

by simply not pushing the keys down as hard. The name itself said it all—**Piano** is Italian for **soft**; **Forte** is Italian for **loud**—the Pianoforte was designed to be both soft *and* loud. Cristofori's new piano action also featured an *escapement* mechanism, which enabled the hammer to disengage from the key once the note had been played, so the

note could be quickly played again at a different velocity. For the first time, keyboardists could significantly change the expressiveness of the notes they were playing. This offered fabulous new possibilities in terms of dynamic range to musicians and composers.

Still, early pianos suffered from limitations of their own. Frames were made mostly of wood, and were unable to effectively withstand the tremendous pull of metal strings at high tension. Tuning was often unstable, and players of the day thought pianos were rather difficult to play.

In response to these complaints, piano makers diligently and ingeniously improved the instrument throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Johann Silbermann crafted pianofortes for J.S. Bach. Johann Stein and his daughter Nanette Streicher made them for Mozart and Beethoven.

In about 1776, there was a second pivotal development in the piano's evolution when **Sebastian Erard** refined Cristofori's action in a way that made it faster and easier to play. Erard's action was so effective that modern piano makers still use the same basic design (remember that, it's important).

From this point, piano making diverged into several different theoretical paths. In England, the focus was on making bigger, stronger, louder pianos. In Germany and Austria, craftsmen made lighter, simpler, more delicate sounding instruments. In America, makers like Alpheus Babcock and Jonas Chickering applied good old yankee ingenuity to their instruments. No matter who made them, however, the primary objective was always to improve the instrument.

Despite everyone's best efforts, however, the piano was far from perfect.

Then in 1853, the New York piano maker, **Henry Steinway**, along with his sons, Henry Jr., Albert, C.F. Theodore, William, and Charles, unveiled a new piano design that utilized an incredibly strong, **one-piece cast iron plate**. This plate allowed Steinway to string his piano at a much higher tension than its predecessors, giving it much more power and helped it to stay in tune reliably.

Steinway's new instrument was also innovative in the way the strings formed a type of fan pattern with the bass strings crossing over the tenor strings. This **overstrung** design centered most of the strings over the middle of the soundboard and gave the piano a richness of tone never before achieved. Steinway's piano was so superior to its competitors' that any maker slow to copy it soon went the way of the dodo. Even today, *all pianos still copy the basic Steinway design*. It was the watershed in piano history, and with its introduction, the big-sounding modern day piano was finally born.

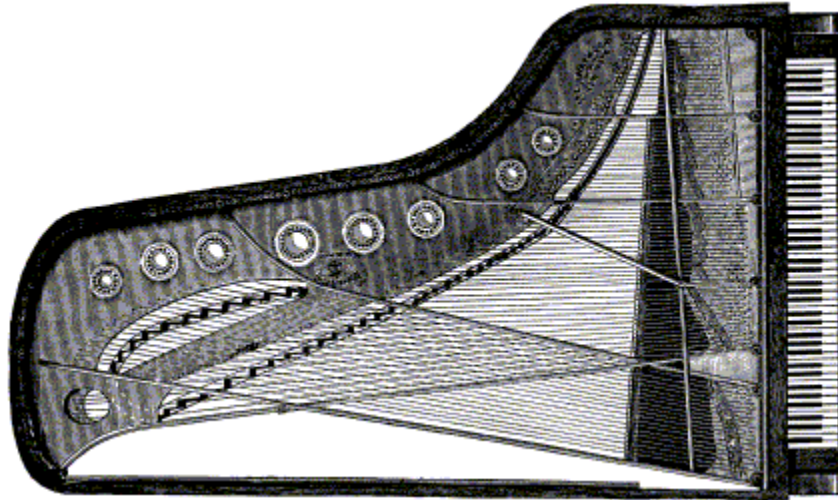
OK, that's the end of the history lesson and here's why it's important: First, remember that the reason Cristofori invented the piano in the first place was to create a keyboard instrument with a great range of volume and tone—in other words, a great range of **expression**. When a piano has a very limited range of expression—either because it was poorly made, or because it is damaged or worn out— it doesn't do what a piano is supposed to do and is, for musical purposes, useless and valueless.

The other thing to learn from our piano history lesson is this: There were really only three major events in the piano's evolution:

1. **Cristofori** installed his action in a modified harpsichord.
2. **Erard** refined Cristofori's action so that it functioned essentially as it does today.
3. **Steinway** developed the one-piece, over-strung, cast iron plate, combined it with Erard's action, and created the modern-day piano.

These three basic components of piano design were perfected over 150 years ago. Today, centuries after the first of these developments, all manufacturers still use these basic components when making their pianos! Consider this: a radio, refrigerator or automobile, made 70 years ago, seems primitive when compared to its modern counterpart. But, a piano made in 1936 is very much the same as one made today. No manufacturer followed a different path a hundred years ago and now builds a piano that's radically different from all the others. Every piano uses Steinway's overstrung, one-piece cast iron plate design and some version of Erard's refined action, both based on Cristofori's first pianoforte!

That means that no one makes a \$4000 console piano with an action (or a pinblock or a soundboard, for that matter) that is functionally



different than the one in any other \$4000 console piano. If a salesperson tells you one \$4000 piano has a technical feature that makes it "better" than other pianos, ask them to demonstrate just exactly what is better about it. Make the salesperson show you, in a way you can clearly hear or see, exactly what it does that gives it an advantage over other pianos. If he or she can't, it's probably just salestalk.

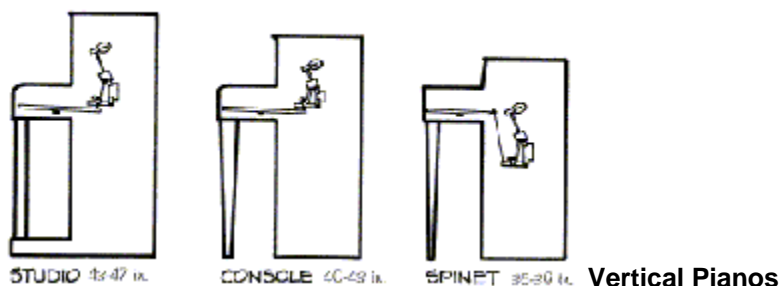
Remember, *every* piano uses Steinway's over-strung, one-piece cast iron plate design, Erard's action, based on Cristofori's first pianoforte! ***The only real difference in pianos, as you'll see, is not in technology, but in quality.*** We'll get to that in a moment. First, however, let's clear up one of the basics that really confuses people—piano sizes.

All Shapes and Sizes

Although the differences in sizes and models can seem daunting, they're really very simple. There are two main types of pianos, **Verticals** and **Grands**. Verticals are the pianos placed upright (vertically) against a wall. Grands are the wing or kidney-shaped pianos.

Both verticals and grands come in various sizes. Verticals are measured by their height, grands by their length. These measurements dictate the size of the two most crucial elements of the piano—the length of the strings and the vibrating area of the soundboard. **An important point to remember:** between two pianos of *equal quality*, longer strings

and a larger soundboard will mean a bigger sound and better tone quality.



There are three modern types of vertical pianos:

Spinets—ranging from 36-39" in height

Consoles—ranging from 40-44" in height

Studios—ranging from 45-52" in height

The depth (about 25") and width (about 58") is roughly the same between the three.

Spinet Pianos

Spinet pianos are no longer made, and that should tell you something. They are mentioned here because they were made right up until the end of the 20th century (that sounds so long ago now, doesn't it?) and a lot of them are still on the used market.

Most pianists feel the spinet's tiny size—which dictates very short strings and a small soundboard—limits it as an effective musical instrument. The small case also forces a compromise in a spinet's action which makes it less responsive, harder to play and, often, problematic. Of the three vertical types, the spinet is certainly the least desirable. Still, a spinet *might* be a reasonable choice for a beginner, and a better quality used one shouldn't be totally eliminated from consideration, especially when budgets are tight.

Note: One of the main reasons spinet pianos are no longer made is the recent availability of inexpensive digital pianos. A digital can certainly be a good choice for a beginner, *especially compared to a spinet*. I'm not talking about one of these little keyboards you see at the electronic mega-stores, or at the buying clubs like Costco. I'm talking about a digital with pedals and an action that mimics that of an acoustic piano. A good one will sound and play better than about 90% of the spinets left on the market. Roland Digitals are even approved for exam use!

Console Pianos

Consoles are the best selling vertical piano because they fit in most home floor plans and feature designer cabinets in every style from cherry French Provincials to sleek, ebony Continentals. Console cases are large enough for a reasonably sized action and soundboard as well as longer strings. Although they usually lack a really "big" sound, they still meet most of the criteria that define an acceptable piano. It's a good mix of sound, touch and style at an affordable price.

Studio Pianos

Studios are, on average, the best of the verticals in terms of sound quality and touch. Because the taller case allows longer string lengths and large soundboard areas, they're the closest thing to a grand piano you'll find among the verticals. For the advanced musician that hasn't the space (or money) for a grand, or for anyone that simply wants to buy the best vertical piano possible, this is the piano of choice.

An important point to remember: the only real size difference between verticals is in height. Depth and width are virtually the same. **A studio takes up no more floor space than a spinet**, so your choice of which vertical to buy will most likely come down to price or styling, not how much room you have.

Grand Pianos

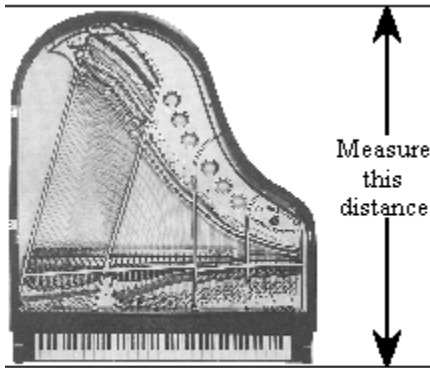
The image that most often comes to mind when people think of pianos is the big, black, grand piano. Although the word "grand" is usually synonymous with "large," in the context of "grand piano," the word refers to the shape of the instrument, not the size.



An important point to remember: you'll hear many different names used in reference to the sizes of grand pianos: Petite Grand, Baby Grand, Parlor Grand, Music Room Grand, Music Hall Grand, Semi-Concert Grand and Concert Grand. These names are often misused and can be terribly confusing. Baby Grand, for example, means different things to different people. Like "compact car," it really isn't a clearly defined size. It's simpler and clearer to refer to the size of a grand by its length, measured from the front of the keyboard to the end of the tail—5'1", 6'7", 7'0", etc. (Fig.1)

Available space in your home will be a consideration when buying a grand because, unlike verticals, the bigger they are, the more room they consume. Smaller grands, 5'1" to 5'8" are the big sellers these days, and there are some very good ones on the market.

Grands smaller than about 5' in length suffer from most of the same limitations as spinet pianos—short strings, small soundboards—and they usually sound more like verticals. If you're interested in that big "grand sound," you'll probably want to buy a larger instrument.



(Fig.1)

The most important factor when choosing a piano, however, is still **quality of construction**. A high quality small grand will always sound better than a poorly made larger grand. As a matter of fact, a fine vertical often eclipses an inferior grand.

The Good, the Bad and the Average

OK, I've harped and harped that the difference in pianos is not in technology, but in *quality*—**the quality of materials and the quality of workmanship used when making the piano**. Ok, but, how does one tell if a piano is a well-built instrument?

We can start with a piano's expected lifetime—it's longevity. However, when we talk about how long a piano will last, we're not usually referring to how long it will be before it breaks down or falls apart, but rather **how long it will maintain good tone and touch**. Physical longevity is important, but a pianist's primary concern is how the instrument responds when played.

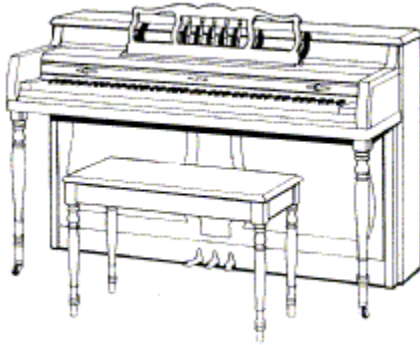
Here's a very important point: it will be unusual if anything major "goes wrong" with any piano made today. No matter which one you buy, the keyboard won't break in half. The legs won't buckle. The soundboard won't warp. The pinblock won't crack. It just doesn't happen. In the very unlikely event one of these issues were to take place, it would likely be due to an atypical manufacturing defect and the problem would likely surface in the first few months you owned the piano. That's why it's typical of manufacturers to offer warranties of 10, 15, even 25 years! Why not? They know they're never going to have to pay out a cent on these warranties. So, let's say you're offered two pianos; they are exactly the same except one has a 10-year warranty; the other has a 25-year warranty. The one with the 25-year warranty costs \$500 more than the one with the 10-year warranty. Buy the one with the 10-year warranty and keep the \$500. You'll never use the extra 15 years, believe me. As a matter of fact, some of the best pianos in the world like Steinway come with the shortest warranties. This doesn't indicate a lack of confidence on the part of these manufacturers. They're just cutting through the bull.

The service issues that are more likely to come up with your piano are ones of adjustment—making the piano play correctly and sound good. These adjustments are not typically covered by the factory warranty and making sure they're taken care of usually has more to do with where you buy your piano than anything else (I'll address that in more detail a little farther on in this article's section on service).

An important point to remember: The only real criterion of a piano's quality is this: Does it sound good and play well? That's it! Now, I know what you're thinking: "If I don't play the piano, how will I know *that*?" Trust me, you only *think* you won't be able to tell the difference. But, unless you're completely tone-deaf, you'd be wrong. Most people think they can't tell the difference *because they're not offered a difference*. If you

go into a shop that sells only one brand or one quality level of piano, you certainly won't be able to tell the difference, *because there won't be any!*

Try to shop where you're offered pianos of different brands and qualities side-by-side. If you don't play, ask to have someone play them for you. Believe me, you'll be able to tell the difference. Most people aren't trained musicians, but they can still tell good music from bad (OK, maybe a bad example). In any case, they still know if a sound is pleasing or not.



A third factor is how it looks, but that's easy. If you think a piano looks good, it does. If ugly pianos are worth less (and they are), it only follows that attractive ones are more valuable. Don't feel embarrassed to be concerned with the beauty of the instrument. If you're afraid that beauty and quality are somehow mutually exclusive, don't be.



Better quality, attractively designed cases cost more for a manufacturer to produce and they usually go on the better pianos in the line. Believe it or not, the nicer a piano looks, the better it usually is. So, go ahead and buy a pretty one.

Quality can be summed up like this: If it plays good, sounds good and looks good—it is good! Nothing more to it than that.

Making Today's Pianos

Today's average piano is mass-produced on an assembly line in China, Korea, Indonesia or Japan.

The largest Asian manufacturers make 100,000-250,000 pianos a year and roll a new piano off their assembly lines every few minutes! A mass-produced piano will usually sound OK for 15 to 20 years with average use and proper care. The downside is, it will sound its best when new, then its tone will deteriorate consistently over the course of its lifetime. If it's in a rigorous or high-use setting (a church or music school, for example) the life expectancy can drop considerably.

By contrast, the best hand-made piano can sound great for the better part of 100 years. Every detail of its construction, from the selection and seasoning of the wood to the final tuning, is overseen and controlled by people, rather than machines. It can take a year or more to make a piano by hand. With proper care, a hand-made piano will maintain high-quality tone and touch for many decades.

Don't get me wrong, assembly-line production is not a bad thing. Assembly lines have allowed manufacturers to offer affordable pianos to the general public and there's nothing wrong with purchasing one. But, mass-produced pianos are not designed to be performance or long-term instruments, *no matter how they're hyped!* New ones can make good, affordable instruments, but don't expect to pass them down to your grandchildren. They won't sound good for that long. Want proof? Today you can find many examples of fine hand made American instruments by companies like Steinway, Weber, Chickering and Mason and Hamlin made over 100 years ago. You can even find examples of hand made European instruments from Bechstein, Bluthner, Grotrian and Bosendorfer, although there are fewer of these because the American manufacturers typically made a tougher, more heavy-duty piano than the Europeans. Many of these pianos are still in use, playing great and sounding wonderful.

At the same time, there are some Asian manufacturers who, when you read their "history," claim to have been making pianos since the 1800's. If so, where are 100-year-old examples of *their* pianos? I've see a lot of pianos in my day, but I've never seen one of those.

It's still true that you get what you pay for and mass-produced pianos simply can't be compared to those made by hand. A mass-produced automobile may be a nice car for several years; but it would be ludicrous to compare one to a Rolls Royce in terms of craftsmanship and longevity.

A Piano by Any Other Name

Over the years there have been over 7000 different piano brand names on the market. Some have become well known and well regarded while others have faded into oblivion.

Well known or not, brand name alone is not always an indicator of quality. Most major manufacturers build several different models of pianos, each with varying degrees of quality – yet put the same name on the front! They'll market their best pianos to people concerned primarily with superior quality and they'll make lower-quality pianos for people that shop with price as their primary concern. Again, there's nothing wrong with this, but if you get caught up in the hype, you're likely to pay too much for your piano.

Here's what I mean: Imagine for a moment that, last night, you saw a famous pianist playing a "Brand Y" piano on TV. This morning, a local piano store advertises a Brand Y piano—perhaps on sale. Your first reaction might be, "Wow, I just saw Mr. Famous Musician playing a Brand Y piano last night, so it must be good, and here's one on sale! What a deal!"

The problem is, there's not much chance the two pianos are really the same. Brand X is likely to have special facilities where they make special pianos for the famous people (usually by hand) and a separate factory for their mass-produced consumer models. Other than the name on the front, Brand X's professional model pianos will have virtually nothing in common with their consumer models. It's a little like watching stock cars zoom around the banked oval at Daytona and thinking,



"Gee, I think I'll go over to my local dealer and get one of those." NASCAR racers may be called Fords, Chevys or Dodges, but they bear little resemblance to the cars you see in the showrooms.

That's why it's hard to compare pianos by brand name alone. The Brand Y company may pay famous professionals a ton of money to play their special, handmade pianos, but that doesn't necessarily mean they make a better \$4000 console than Brand Z. As a matter of fact, you may pay a lot more for a Brand X piano because they have to pay all those professionals endorsements to play their pianos.

Used But Not Used Up

Buying a quality used piano might be a good option for many people. The only problem is finding one. On average, very few of the pianos advertised in the newspaper classifieds are of even marginal quality. Many used pianos, that were well made instruments when originally purchased, are now practically worthless because they've been neglected or abused.

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That's a shame, because a good piano, well cared for, will hold its value extremely well. In fact, it's not unusual for a better quality, well-cared-for used piano to cost more than a lesser quality new one. And that's the way it should be.

I highly recommend buying a used piano that has been **reconditioned**. However, you have to make sure that reconditioning work has actually been done. As I said, many used pianos have been poorly cared for. It will take more than furniture polish and a vacuum cleaner to put them back in good working order. They'll require some tender loving care and expertise by

someone that knows what they're doing. A store that claims its used pianos are reconditioned, but has no shop in which this work could have been performed, should be suspect. Ask to see the shop! Does the store offer a warranty on the work they're done?

A used or reconditioned piano shouldn't be confused with a **rebuilt** one. Rebuilding is, practically, the complete **remanufacturing** of an instrument. A quality rebuilding job is a work of art that, when done correctly by a skilled craftsman, essentially makes an old piano new again. The talent and experience of the rebuilder is critical. This is not an inexpensive process; and it should be compared to the cost of a new instrument rather than a used one. Oftentimes, a rebuilt high-quality piano is the best choice.

An important point to remember: I saw a classified ad recently for a "completely rebuilt" grand piano. I expected this piano was not truly rebuilt because the \$2500 asking price was ridiculously low, but I took a look at it anyway (hey, you never know, right?). I was correct. Yes, there'd been some cosmetic work done to the piano; it had been restrung and the hammers had been filed, but that's a far cry from "completely rebuilt." I don't think the seller was trying to cheat anyone, she just didn't know what she was talking about. Make sure, before you even think about buying a "rebuilt" piano, you have a qualified technician look it over to make sure the seller's claims are not embellished or mistaken.

Which One Should I buy?

Getting good, informed advice on your piano purchase is, admittedly, difficult. Many people have a friend or acquaintance that plays. They naturally assume that, if their friend plays the piano, he or she must know something about pianos. You know what they say about assuming. Remember, few piano players truly know much about their instrument.

Still, if you ask many players what kind of piano you should buy, they are very likely to launch into a lengthy and passionate soliloquy on the merits of various piano brands. It's important to know that many of their comments may be based on limited experience, mistaken information, hearsay and folk tales. You've probably heard that "A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing." Make sure the advice you receive on pianos is good advice, based on fact.

Here's a test you can use: If someone comments, for or against, a certain brand, question them a little further (remember that most companies make several, different-quality models.) Ask them to be specific as to which particular *models* of that brand are good. If they seem to know little about current models, they probably don't know as much as they think they do.

So, to whom do you listen? When you talk to people, assume little and listen to the person or persons who seem to have the best technical knowledge—not just sales talk, but real information about pianos in general, how they work and what the meaningful differences between them are. If someone can't explain it to you so that it makes a little sense, it's probably not clear to him or her either.

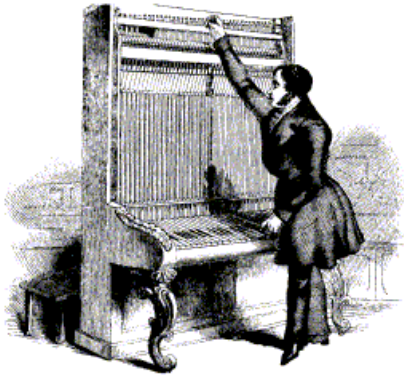
Intuition can be very valuable as well. If you feel you have it, use it to tell you who's interested in you and your concerns and who only wants to promote their own agenda. Remember that the only *real* measure of quality in a piano is how it's made—the quality of materials and quality of workmanship.

Service: The Ghost in the Machine!

This might surprise you, but ***no new piano is really finished when it leaves the factory.*** All pianos have very complicated mechanisms that require delicate technical work to

assure that they achieve whatever potential they have. It's up to the dealer that sells the piano to make sure that all of these critical adjustments are made. After the piano is in your home, if it needs any adjustments—and, likely, it will in its new environment—it's important that they can be made in a timely manner by a competent technician.

Quality pianos can also be *voiced* and *regulated* by a qualified technician. That is, the tone and touch of the piano can be adjusted somewhat to suit the individual taste of the player. Just how much, depends on the piano. The better the piano, the more it can be adjusted. Having your piano properly voiced and regulated can greatly increase the quality of its sound and performance and makes it a more enjoyable piano to play. Many dealers don't even mention this to their customers because they don't employ technicians with the ability to perform these services. They just hope you don't bring it up. Ask your dealer about this – this type of work should be covered!



Tuning an upright in the Broadwood Factory, Horseferry Road, London, 1842. Showing the old "sticker" action. Reproduction from "The Penny Magazine," Supplement, London, April 1842. Courtesy: John Broadwood Piano Company, Ltd., London, England.

Ignoring whether or not proper service will be performed on their piano is often one of the biggest mistakes people make when buying a piano. No one would consider buying a new car from a dealer that didn't have a service department, but people do it with pianos all the time. It doesn't take much expertise to take a piano out of a box and send it to your home. If a store claims to offer service, ask to see the shop. If there isn't one, the store probably "farms out" its repairs, usually to the lowest bidder. If you buy from a dealer without a shop and technicians on-site, you're probably getting a lot less than you're paying for, regardless of price.

"Mom, It's Time To Make Me Practice!"

New, used, rebuilt, vertical or grand, whatever the choice turns out to be, remember that quality always pays off in the long run. Pianists, especially students, must have an instrument that functions properly if even the most basic results are expected of them.

Parents sometimes buy an old, beat-up piano for their beginners in the theory that, when their child "learns to play," they'll buy a better one. That's like putting an adult size 10 pair of shoes on a 1-year-old and saying, "When he learns to walk, I'll get him some shoes that fit." The problem is, it just doesn't work that way.

It might surprise you to know that most piano dealers wish it did. If piano dealers could create a whole new generation of piano players simply by supplying cheap, old, beat-up pianos to beginners for a few months, the dealers would be crazy not to do it! It would be absolutely terrific for business.



There's no shortage of old, cheap pianos, languishing in basements and garages. Most could be purchased for practically nothing. If beginners could really learn to play on pianos like these, dealers could buy them by the truck load, re-sell them to parents, then wait a few months until everyone came back to buy good quality instruments. It would be a no-brainer.

Most kids never learn to play on sub-standard pianos. Remember, they're not really learning to play the piano, ***they're learning to make music!*** The piano is the tool to accomplish the goal, not the goal itself. When their piano doesn't work properly or sound good, even beginners become frustrated. If you ask piano teachers why so many kids give up on piano lessons, most of them will tell you it's the frustration of trying to learn on a poor piano.

To put it in a different frame of reference, think of learning to play a sport. Everyone knows you have to learn the basics correctly, because any bad habits you pick up when you're first learning to play are often troublesome to you throughout your life. How many amateur golfers spend a fortune on swing-correction gimmicks, or give up the game altogether, because they can't overcome the slice they developed when they first—incorrectly—learned to swing a club? The basics are the *most* important thing to learn.

It's the same when learning to play the piano. A piano with poor tone and touch doesn't allow students to make rewarding music. Believe it or not, beginners will be able to tell the difference between a good-sounding piano and a bad-sounding one in a matter of weeks. They try to make up for the limitations of the instrument, but they learn bad habits and the bad habits limit their ability. Soon, interest wanes.

After the child has given up, the parent is often relieved that a minimum of money was spent. This entirely misses the point that something of greater value was lost: the joy of making music. It can't be stressed enough that a beginner is practically doomed to failure if given a sub-standard piano on which to learn.

Have you ever heard anyone say that they were sorry they learned to play the piano? Never! The overwhelming number of people who took lessons, then quit, regret it later on. They would give anything if their parents had encouraged them to stick with their music lessons when they were young.

If you're a parent, think ahead a bit for your child. If they can just be encouraged and made aware of what they're accomplishing, in the long run they'll be glad they stuck with it, and they'll thank you for your support.

Long-term Investment, Long Lasting Value!

Piano selection should be thought of as a long-term investment. If selected properly and cared for, quality pianos appreciate in value, and most become family treasures, passed on and enjoyed through several generations. So, if you're going to buy a piano, buy a good one, make it an important part of your home and offer encouragement to those who play it. That's the real investment you make, and the one that pays the highest dividends, year after year after year.