



How to buy a piano



Buying an instrument for learning to play the piano can be a difficult and expensive business. The purpose of this handout is to help make your life a little bit easier and provide you with some information to help you make this difficult decision.

4 Types of instruments

First of all, you basically have the choice of three different kinds of instruments: a keyboard, a digital piano and an acoustic piano.

1. **Keyboard:** These usually do not have the full number of keys as a full piano keyboard (88 keys). Electric keyboards have usually between 61 and 76 keys. Keyboards do not have weighted keys, this means that they are lighter to play than pianos. The down side of this is that students do not develop the necessary finger strength to play the piano properly. They are also not very responsive to touch, therefore students are unable to develop the ability to control dynamics and play the piano with expression. Because keyboards do not come with a stand, you need to buy these in addition to the keyboard. When you put the keyboard on a table, bed or ironing board etc, there are two problems with this – one is that often it will get in your way and will have to be put away (which becomes a deterrent for practice) and the other is that by having the keyboard on an object that is not suitable, you have a good chance of developing some bad playing techniques. The upside of keyboards is that they are cheap. You can also plug in headphones and practice silently. Often keyboards have loads of cool sounds and are a lot of fun to play. Professional musicians will also use them to create effects and to help them write music. You can often plug them into computers. Because they are so fun, young kids get a lot out of them and they can be good for getting Little Maestros interested in playing. Some piano teachers will say a flat out No! to keyboards, but really keyboards are fine to start off with, having said this, it is still better to have a piano if you can. In Level 4 of the Sykes Piano Program (it takes the average student 30 piano lessons to get here), students are introduced

to playing with the pedal and also playing with dynamics, therefore students really need to upgrade to a piano or a digital piano at this stage. If you already have a piano, perhaps you could think about picking up a cheap 2nd hand keyboard just to have fun with or if there are two students in the one family it might be a good idea to have two instruments.

2. **Digital Piano or Stage Piano:** These have a full-length keyboard (88 keys) and have weighted keys. You can get portable digital pianos which are often called Stage Pianos and come with a foldable stand, and then other digital pianos are made to be more like pianos, and come on a solid wooden cabinet with inbuilt pedals. Digital pianos and stage pianos are great if you want more of a piano feel, but don't want to disturb people in your house or the people in an apartment building when you play, or simply if you can not afford a good acoustic piano. They vary in the number of sounds and features that they have, and the quality of the sound. The downside of digitals is that they still don't feel or sound the same as pianos, and so they can be not as enjoyable to play and student's technique will not develop as well as if you are learning on an acoustic piano.
3. **Upright Piano:** This is your standard piano and what is recommended for most students to own. You really have the opportunity to enjoy the piano the most when you have a piano. No matter how good a digital sound is, it will never beat the sound of a nice acoustic piano, therefore it is best to buy a piano rather than a digital instrument if possible. You will have a greater chance of continued success if you own a piano.
4. **Grand Piano:** These are the best type of pianos that you can buy. Having said this though, a good quality upright is better than buying a cheap grand. A baby grand piano is anything less than 6 feet in length and a grand is anything 6 feet and longer.

What kind of instrument should you get?

First of all, you will need to decide whether to buy a keyboard, digital piano or piano. This all depends on your situation. This is what we recommend you buy:

1) Keyboard

- You are not sure whether you or your child will be continuing to learn the piano

2) Digital Piano

- If you are moving soon and do not want to move a piano
- You live in an apartment building and think that a piano is too noisy
- If you can not afford to buy a piano
- Because of other members of the household, the student often needs to practice with headphones on
- The student is really into contemporary music and will probably need a stage piano for gigs
- As a second instrument if you can afford it, have the space or if there are several members of the family learning piano

3) Piano:

- If you can afford it
- If it is likely that the student will be playing the piano for a long time
- If the student is not a beginner. I would not recommend that students are playing on an acoustic piano by the time they are approximately in Grade 2, unless absolutely necessary that they continue learning on a digital piano

Prices

Keyboards: You can pick these up 2nd hand from \$100* and new from \$200. They are rarely more than \$400 new.

Digital Pianos: These start at about \$700 and can be as expensive as \$20,000 for a professional stage piano. Most people buy digital pianos at the \$1500 - \$3000 price mark.

Upright Pianos: You can pick up old 2nd hand pianos for about \$500. These are usually 'past it' and not worth buying. We recommend that you purchase a piano at a minimum of \$5000. Upright pianos are often around the \$8000 mark and a very good one is around \$14000. Upright pianos become more expensive as they get taller. They have what are called 'beginner' pianos, which are quite short.

Grand Pianos: New these can start at about \$8000 but it is recommended that you never buy a grand piano for less than about \$15,000 new. Grand pianos can be very expensive. Concert grand pianos are around the \$250,000 - \$500,000 pricemark! 'At home' grand pianos go up to roughly the \$70,000 mark.

* All prices in this document are in Australian Dollars.

So what to buy

A keyboard might be just the thing to get until you can see that you or your child is going to continue learning. Then when you reach Level 4, you will need to upgrade. If you think that you will never purchase an acoustic piano, then try to buy the best digital piano that you can. If you think that you would like to upgrade to an acoustic piano one day, then perhaps do not spend a lot of money on a digital piano. Save that money to buy an acoustic piano further down the track. Otherwise, if you can, bite the bullet, and go for an acoustic. What keyboard or digital piano?

This depends on how much you want to or can spend. There is not a lot of range when it comes to keyboards. Digitals pianos though – well some have a lot of sounds and features and others are basically an electric piano with a few other extras. The more features that they have, generally the more they cost.

Brands

Does brand matter? Yes it does. Yamaha and Kawai are like your standard, middle of the ground, reliable piano in Australia, I like to say they are the Ford and Holden of pianos. There are many brands of pianos. You have your Rolls Royce brands too like Steinway. Piano prices have come down significantly in recent years. This may be due to the fact that many companies are making pianos at a much cheaper price than before. It is like

when Hyundai starting making their Excels – this was a new car on the market that was at a price much lower than other new cars. Some of these new cheaper brands are really good and others are horrid. Fortunately we have a thing these days called google. So I would go and read reviews if possible.

Budget

If you have \$2000 - \$3000 to spend, then I would recommend that you buy a digital piano, unless you are able to find a good second hand piano for that price. If buying an old 2nd hand piano, you may like to ask your teacher if they can have a look at it for you. If you have \$5000 to spend on a piano, you may be better off buying a 2nd hand piano, rather than a new one. It all depends on the brand. In Australia, a lot of 2nd hand pianos are imported from Japan and sold here. Some of these are quite good. I'll stop here with budget. If spending \$8000 or more, you will be buying yourself a very good piano.

Buy the sound that you like

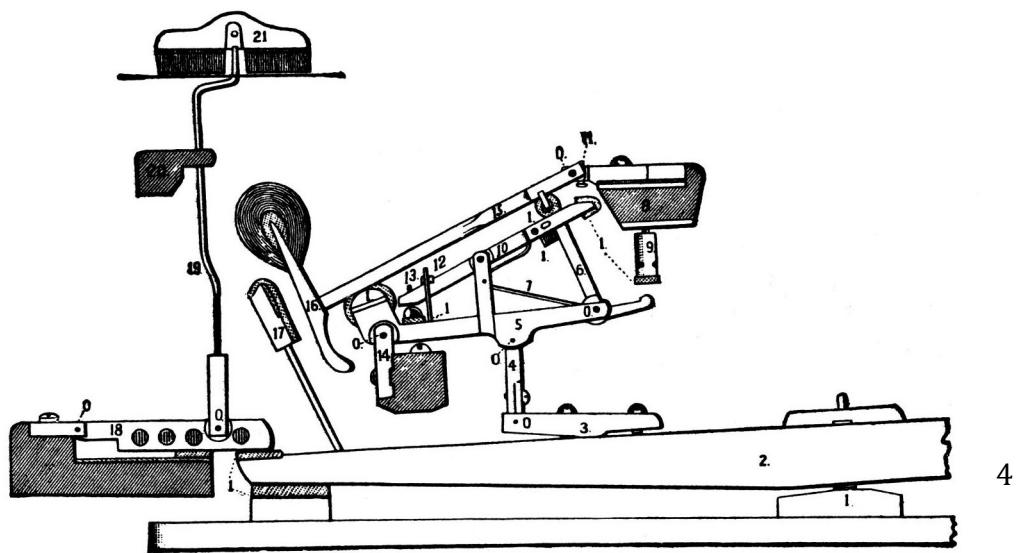
Pianos are a very personal thing. I always relate it to wine. One wine may not necessarily be better than another wine, but you may like one more than the other. Therefore choose a piano that you like the sound of.

To help you decide on the sound

A good way to compare the sound of pianos is to play the same piece on several pianos and see which sound you like the best. It is good to play a slow, flowing piece and contrast this with playing something that is a bit more up-tempo.

How a piano works

Basically there are strings that are hit by hammers when you play a note. This sound is amplified by the fact that it's all housed inside a large wooden box. There are things called dampers that come off the string when you play a note, and then go back on the string when you let go of the note to stop the sting vibrating, therefore stopping the sound. The damper stops the string from vibrating. There is something like 20 tons of tension on a grand piano and something like 2,500 parts in a piano (don't quote me on these things). The mechanics of the hammer and damper system are very complex and involves wood, springs, leather straps, felt, pins and more.



Open the lid and have a look inside

You can tell a lot about the piano simply by having a look inside. With new pianos, you may be able to tell the difference in the quality of the parts being used between brands, or perhaps not. With old pianos, you will be able to see how old and used the piano is. Things to look for:

- No broken strings
- Are the strings tarnished or rusted?
- What colour is the felt on the hammers and dampers. When they were new they were white. What colour are they now? If they are brownish, then they are probably pretty old
- Where the hammers hit the strings, grooves form in the felt of the hammers. How deep are these grooves? If they are deep, this means that the piano has been used a lot
- How straight do the notes/hammer/dampers look. If things are looking nice and even and lined up, its an indication that everything is in good order. If everything is looking wonky, then its an indication that the piano has been well used, and its time for some work to be done on it to get it all back into good order

Soundboard

The soundboard is the piece of wood at the back of an upright piano, or the underneath part of a grand piano. The quality of the soundboard has a large influence of the quality of the sound of the piano. Never buy a piano with a cracked soundboard. Also the spruce is the best wood for soundboards. What wood has been used for this soundboard? It is best that the grain of the wood is close together. It is also best if the soundboard is not laminated.

Check out the treble and the bass

I find that the best place to check out the quality of the sound of the piano is to play some of the highest notes on the piano and then some of the lowest. You could do this too, comparing a few pianos if you are somewhere where there are a few pianos for sale. A good piano has a good strong sound in the treble and the bass rather than a weak sound. Some pianos in the bass, they have a kind of muted sound – you don't want that, or an annoying treble sound – you don't want that either.

Tuning

If the piano is in a music store, then it should be in tune, but this is not always the case. Sometimes it is difficult for stores to keep all of their pianos in tune. With a lot of the notes in a piano, there are 3 strings per note, then as you go lower on the piano, it goes to 2 strings per note, and then the lowest strings have only 1 string. You can see this if you open up the lid and have a look. What this means is that these 3 strings per note, or 2 strings per note, can get out of tune with each other and therefore the sound of the notes will not be so nice. To check if a piano is in tune, it is a good idea to play several 8ves (eg. from one C to the next C) as separate notes on the piano and you should, or may, be able to tell whether it really is an 8ve, that is, that it is in tune. The extremities of the piano, that is the highest notes and the lowest notes, tend to be the most obvious notes to hear if

they are out of tune so play these and see what you think. If you are interested in a piano in a music store and it is not in tune properly, you can ask them to tune it for you to help you decide whether you would like to buy it. Though I bought my grand piano when it was not in tune. It had just come out of the sea container. I could tell that I liked the sound.

To get pianos tuned costs about \$150 - \$200 and should be done at least once a year. Music stores often offer 1 – 4 free tunes with the purchase of the piano depending on how much you spend on the piano. You need to wait about 3 months after the piano has been moved to your house before you tune it for the first time. This is because the piano needs to adjust to its new environment. I know. They are sensitive things these pianos. They are made out of wood after all and wood is very susceptible to changes in the atmosphere.

Check that all of the notes work

You can simply play all of the notes on the piano, one after another and see that they all work.

Check the repeat on the notes

As mentioned before, the mechanics of the note/hammer/damper action in pianos is incredibly complex. One of the things that you want in a piano is for the note to return quickly so that you can play it again. This is more important as you become a more advanced piano player. As you can play faster, you need the notes to work faster. Some pianos can be so bad at returning, they stick down and don't come back up. These things can sometimes be fixed easily, and sometimes they are not so easy to fix. You could always ask a piano tuner/technician to come and have a look at the piano for you and give you an assessment of the piano. They will be able to tell you whether it is a big problem or not. A way to check the repeat on notes is to repeat each note several times as quickly as you can. If the note returns and is ready to be replayed, then things are working well. If not, there is a problem.

Check that the pedals work

Upright pianos that are made before roughly the 1960's only have 2 pedals – a soft pedal (the left pedal) and a sustain (the right pedal). Upright pianos made after this have a great feature called the practice pedal (the middle pedal). It can lock down. It brings a piece of felt down between the hammer and the string therefore muting, or softening the sound. For a household where someone is learning the piano, the practice pedal can be very handy. They can practice without disturbing the rest of the household too much. The soft pedal does not work that well in upright pianos, so don't be surprised if you do not notice too much difference between the soft pedal being on or off. On upright pianos it brings the hammers closer to the strings, therefore reducing the momentum of the hammer hitting the string, which then makes the sound quieter. In a grand piano, the whole keyboard and note mechanism moves slightly to the right causing the unused, soft part of the hammers to hit the strings, and not all of the strings to be struck when there are multiple strings per note.

Research the serial number

It is possible to find out the age of the piano by googling the serial number. You will find the serial number engraved into the frame of the piano when you open up the lid.

The bridge

In pianos you will see that there are two sets of strings. One set going in one direction and the other set going in the other direction. Both of these have their own bridge, or connection with the soundboard. What you want to do is find out where the gap on the piano is between one set of strings and the other. It's usually around the D to F below middle C. Want you don't want to notice a change in the sound when you move from one bridge to the next. So starting a few notes below the bridge, play the notes up the keyboard until you are a few notes past the bridge. It should sound seamless. Blended. You shouldn't be able to hear a difference. If you do, then perhaps the quality of the piano is not too good.

Old Pianos

Just a little thing to add about old pianos. Often students inherit an old family piano and are very happy about it, as they should be, because the piano has history and has been loved and cherished. Or someone has an old piano that is not being used, and they offer to give or sell the piano to you. The problem with old pianos though is often, not always, they do not work so well. Unfortunately pianos deteriorate with age, not improve. So what do you do? The piano may or may not be OK to play for a while, but I always recommend if possible, the old piano, if it is past its time, is kept as a piece of furniture and a new piano is bought to be played. It would be nice if your teacher could have a look at the old piano and let you know if the piano is still playable or not.

Repairing old pianos

There are many repairs that can be done to old pianos. You can:

- Replace the soundboard
- Change the strings
- Reface the hammers
- Reshape the hammers
- Soften the hammers
- Regulate – make all of the notes and mechanism even
- Change many other parts in the mechanism

Often repairs to old pianos are very expensive. It may be worth spending the money if you love the piano, or the piano has great potential to be repaired, but you may also be better off spending that money on a new piano. Always get a quote on how much it costs to repair pianos rather than buying them and finding out later that it costs too much to repair.

The piano stool

It is important that the stool height is at a good height so that you play with a good technique. It is always best to have an adjustable stool so that it can be adjusted to suit

the height of the student, and also be adjusted as the young student grows taller. Usually when you buy a new piano, it comes with a piano stool. If possible ask for this to be an adjustable stool. Adjustable stools are quite expensive to buy, but they are worth it, so perhaps you should look into getting one if you do not have one.

Piano moving

In large cities, there are companies that just specialize in piano moving. Yes, it is true. They spend all day moving pianos. When you are moving, it may be better to have your piano moved by professional piano movers rather than leaving it to your regular removal company. Piano movers have a minimum rate for moving pianos and this goes up in price depending on how many stairs you have and how far the move is. If you have quite a few stairs, I would definitely recommend that you use a piano moving company. Some of these companies own a special gadget that has tank-like tracks that takes pianos up stairs.

The piano trolley is another fantastic gadget. It is SO much easier moving a piano with a piano trolley then without one. This is a small trolley with 4 wheels. You can hire them from some hire companies. If you are moving a piano by yourself, I would strongly recommend that you use a piano trolley.

Hiring an instrument

Hiring an instrument is an option for students that:

- Are not sure if they will be learning piano for a long time
- Are moving soon
- Want to learn on a piano but can not afford to buy one

You could hire a keyboard or digital piano just so that you have an instrument to start on while you work out whether you are going to continue learning the piano. Then once you have decided to continue you can then buy an instrument. Piano hire starts at about \$60 per month and often comes with a minimum 3 month hire contract. Some hire companies and music stores also have a 'rent to you own' option. Which means that the some of the money that you spend on hiring the instrument can go towards purchasing the instrument, or they have basically allow you to pay off the instrument in installments rather than all upfront.

Good luck finding your instrument. I hope that you find something that you love and love playing it too! ~ Julia Sykes