

Piano Perspectives



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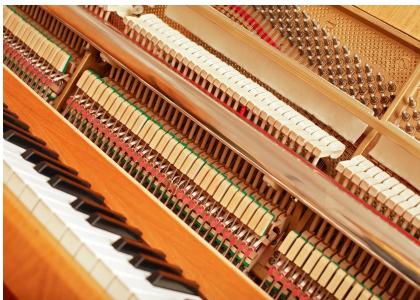
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Why Do Pianos Need Tuning?

"If I move my piano to another room, does it need to be re-tuned? My grandmother had a fine old upright that she never got tuned. Why does my piano need regular tuning? Back home we always kept a jar of water in the bottom of the piano. Does this help keep the piano in tune? How often does my piano need tuning?" Piano technicians hear these questions every day. Tuning is the most frequent and important type of piano maintenance, but it's often the least understood. Here we'll look at why pianos go out of tune and how you can help yours stay in better tune between visits from your technician.

First, new pianos are a special case; their pitch drops quickly for the first few years as the new strings stretch and wood parts settle. It's very important that a new piano be maintained at proper pitch (A-440) during this period, so the string tension and piano structure can reach stable equilibrium. Most manufacturers recommend three to four tunings the first year, and at least two annually after that.



Aside from this initial settling, seasonal change is the primary reason pianos go out of tune. To understand why, you must realize that the piano's main acoustical structure, the soundboard, is made of wood (typically 3/8-inch thick Sitka spruce). And while the wooden soundboards produce a wonderful sound, they also react constantly to weather. As humidity goes up, a soundboard swells, increasing its crowned shape and stretching the piano's strings to a higher pitch. During dry times, the soundboard flattens out, lowering tension on the strings and causing the pitch to drop.

Unfortunately, the strings don't change pitch equally. Those near the soundboard's edge move the

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Do You Need Gift Ideas for the Holiday Season?

Here are a couple of ideas for the music lovers in your life.



For those who like to listen, consider a CD of Christmas music, *O Come Let Us Adore Him*, a 2004 collaboration of Floyd Gadd and Brandon pianist Kara Dixon. You can preview tracks from this 25 song collection at www.floydgadd.com. Copies are available directly from Floyd for \$20.00, tax included.

For the piano players in your life, consider a *gift certificate for a piano tuning*. A well tuned piano makes playing much more pleasurable. For students who are taking lessons, a tuned piano provides an extra incentive for practice. For further information and for pricing, contact Floyd directly.

Strings and Things

Although there are only 88 keys, a piano has over 200 strings – one per note in the low bass, two per note in the upper bass, and three per note in the treble.

Tension averages approximately 160 lbs. per string. All together, the strings are stretched to a tension of 18 to 20 tons (close to 30 tons in a concert grand).

The strings gradually increase in thickness and length from treble to bass, and bass strings are wrapped with copper to make them produce a lower pitch.

Pianos range in weight from about 300 lbs. for a spinet to almost 1000 lbs. for a concert grand.

There are 8000-10,000 moving parts in a piano.

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“Why Do Pianos Need Tuning” - continued from page 1

least, and those near the center move the most. So, unless it's in a hermetically sealed chamber, every piano is constantly going out of tune!

The good news is there are some simple things you can do to keep your piano sounding sweet and harmonious between regular service appointments. Although it's impossible to prevent every minor variation in indoor climate, you can often improve conditions for your piano.

- Start by locating the piano away from direct sunlight, drafts, and heat sources. Excess heating causes extreme dryness, so try to keep the temperature moderate (below 70 degrees) during the winter heating season.
- Get a portable room humidifier, or install a central humidification system to combat winter dryness in climates with very cold, dry winters. A portable dehumidifier or a dehumidifier added to your air-conditioning system can remove excess moisture during hot, muggy summers.
- If controlling your home's environment is impractical, or if you want the best protection possible, have a humidity control system installed inside your piano. These are very effective in controlling the climate within the instrument itself. Besides improving tuning stability, they help minimize the constant swelling and shrinking of your piano's wooden parts. The critical part of such a system is the humidistat, a device that monitors the relative humidity within the piano and adds or removes moisture as needed. Jars of water, light bulbs, or other “home remedies” have no such control and can actually do more harm than good.

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Are the notes getting smaller?

Many pianists who wear glasses find that reading music at the piano becomes difficult. Bifocals especially can be a problem, since the music is typically being seen through the part of the lens meant for distance vision.



Over-the-counter reading glasses are helpful for some, but sometimes the only real solution is to get a set of prescription glasses just for use at the piano.

The cost of prescription glasses makes many people hesitate to purchase a pair that will only be used at the piano. However, just as online pharmacies sprang up to make medication available at lower prices for our neighbors to the south, online optical dispensaries have sprung up, making prescription glasses available at very reasonable prices indeed.

To find a link to an online optical dispensary that provides quality frames and lenses and remarkably low prices, visit the Floyd Gadd Piano Service website at www.72piano.com, and follow the “prescription glasses” link on the left side of the home page.

Is there anything wrong with locating my piano near a fireplace or hot-air vent?

Absolutely! Pianos function best when the environment is as stable as possible. Minor variations are inevitable in all households, but by keeping your piano away from a heat source, you help keep those variations to a minimum.

By locating your piano away from hot-air vents, fireplaces, wood stoves, and sunny windows, you let the heat spread out and dissipate as much as possible. If you can feel one spot on your piano that's warmer than another, you have a problem.

The same holds true for cold or moist air. Watch out for open windows in winter that allow cold air to blow directly onto the piano. Avoid putting the piano near a steamy shower or a leaky clothes dryer.

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