

Piano Perspectives



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Evaluating the Student Piano

How important is the condition of the pianos on which a student practices and takes lessons?

How far does a student need to progress before the quality and condition of the instrument used for practice begin to matter?

What are the basic qualities a piano must possess if it is to be used for learning and practicing?



If you are the parent of a child who is studying piano, these are important questions for you to explore. You and your child are making a significant investment of time, money and effort in music lessons. You want to do what you can to help your child persevere. You want your child to succeed in learning the skills and discovering the joys of making music.

The condition of the practice piano is a pivotal factor in shaping a student's attitude toward the task of learning music. Even a fairly modest instrument, if it is properly set up for tuning, tone and touch, will reward a child for the effort invested. An instrument that is not properly tuned and set up, however, will frustrate the efforts of the student to play well, and will stifle the development of the musical imagination.

The condition of the practice piano is extremely significant in shaping the attitude of the student, and in nurturing the

musical imagination. For this reason, providing a proper instrument is vital even in the earliest stages of the learning process. To put off providing a musically responsive instrument until a student has demonstrated an inclination to work hard and persevere is to deny the student the very thing that will most inspire that effort and the commitment to stick with it.

So what constitutes an suitable student piano? What characteristics does a piano need to have to permit a learner to play with control, and expression and imagination?

First of all, all the *basic functions* of the piano need to be in order. It must be tunable at standard pitch, and it needs to be kept in tune. All of the keys need to work with no sticking, and the left and right pedals need to function properly.

Second, the piano must be *inviting to the student*. The keyboard needs to be in good condition, with no missing keytops. There should be no feeling of heaviness or stiffness in playing, but the keys should not feel loose or sloppy. The sound of the piano should be pleasing and clear, neither harsh nor dull. There should be a consistency of response from note to note across the keyboard—no individual notes behaving differently from those around them, no multiple bouncing of hammers when keys are struck, no clicks or groans as the notes are played and released. The change in the quality of sound from low to high should progress gradually, with no sudden changes from one note to the next.

Third, the piano must be *musically responsive*. It should be easy to produce both tender and dramatic sounds, depending on how hard the keys are played. There should be a consistent and predictable responsiveness of touch, so that the same degree of effort in playing produces the same loudness and tone from note to note.

These characteristics represent some minimum requirements for a student piano. How do some

of the pianos most commonly found in homes fare when measured against these basic benchmarks? What follows is a basic overview.

The Pianos in the Neighborhood

The Big Old Uprights

Easily found at a low price these days, most of the large upright pianos were manufactured prior to 1930. Many of them were built to very high standards, and their large soundboards and long bass strings made possible a richness of tone that is hard to match with a smaller instrument. A few of these instruments have weathered the passage of time remarkably well,



but many are showing their age. Hammers are usually quite deeply grooved, resulting in a somewhat brash tone, and reduced capacity for beautiful soft playing. Hammer replacement is often the best option. Loose

tuning pins, dull bass strings and deteriorating bridges are also frequently seen. Properly restored, these can be wonderful instruments, but the cost of doing so often makes some of the other options more attractive. From 1930 through to about 1960, the trend was toward smaller pianos. These too are showing a lot of wear and tear.

Domestic Pianos Since 1960

During the 1960's pianos from Japan began giving North American manufactures a run for their money. Most builders of mid-priced pianos responded to the challenge of the less expensive imports by cheapening down their instruments to compete. Various manufacturing shortcuts were employed that resulted in instruments that were of limited scope tone-wise, and that had less-than-satisfying touch response. Many of these pianos have been quite gently used, and various problems that arose from manufacturing short-cuts can be resolved by careful reworking. Most of these pianos will remain modest instruments, but they are capable of being significantly improved from how they left the factory.



The Asian Pianos

By the end of the 1960's, Japanese piano coming into Canada were of very good quality. North American builders of consumer-grade pianos were not able to compete, and vanished from the scene by the end of the 20th century. As the prices of Japanese pianos climbed, Korean manufacturers stepped in to make pianos available at a lower price point. Indonesian builders stepped in somewhat later, and China is now the rising player in the field of piano manufacturing.

The Japanese-built pianos set a high standard in the degree to which they were regulated and voiced before leaving the factory. They continue to prove to be an



excellent value for the used piano buyer, even if some of the older ones are in need of some reconditioning. At least initially, some of the other Asian imports did not measure up to Japanese standards of factory finishing, but their engineering tended to be sound, and with careful voicing and regulating by a competent technician, many of them can become very satisfying musical instruments. The entry of the new lower-priced Chinese pianos into the marketplace has driven the prices of used pianos down, so there are opportunities to pick up used Asian pianos at very reasonable prices.

New Pianos

According to industry analysts, new consumer-grade pianos available today are the best they have ever been. Engineering standards tend to be high throughout the industry, even if in some instances the factory voicing and regulating leave a bit to be desired. Careful, informed shopping together with some after-purchase work by a skilled piano technician can result in the consumer having a very satisfying instrument that with proper maintenance will give many years of enjoyment.

The Bottom Line

With used pianos, there is almost always a fair bit of reconditioning, regulating and voicing necessary in order to achieve a degree of musical responsiveness that will best inspire and encourage the learning pianist. Even with many new pianos, the best playability will be achieved with an investment in after-purchase service. Involving your piano technician in your instrument selection process can help you avoid surprises and end up with a piano that will serve you very well.

Piano Perspectives is archived at tuning.floydgadd.com