

**PURPOSE:** When buying a used piano, always keep in mind the primary purpose for your purchase. People who want their child to take piano lessons purchase the great majority of used pianos. This is a very noble and responsible decision on the part of the parents as studies have shown that learning to play the piano can actually increase intelligence in children. This brochure has been prepared primarily for the person who wants to buy a used vertical piano for the musical education of his child or for his own musical enjoyment. Nevertheless, much of the advice will also apply to grand pianos.

**TYPES:** Pianos come in two varieties - horizontal and vertical. Horizontal pianos, commonly called "grand" pianos, normally sit on three legs and have their strings parallel to the floor. If you have the floor space and the money, grand pianos are usually a better investment than vertical pianos. They generally have a better sound and a smoother working action. (The "action" is the mechanical part of the piano that transfers the downward motion on the front of the key to the hammer, which strikes the string.)

Due mainly to financial considerations, most pianos bought for children to take lessons on are vertical pianos. Vertical pianos come in four varieties: spinet, console, studio, and upright. Spinets are the shortest, about 36 inches high. The consoles are a bit taller, about 40 to 42 inches tall. Studio pianos are about 45 inches high and the music desk may run the whole length of the piano. These are often found in schools and music teaching studios. The term "old upright" refers to pianos built prior to the 1940's which were about five feet tall. However some manufacturers have started building these taller upright pianos again in recent years, usually 50 inches tall or more. A taller piano will have a larger soundboard and longer bass strings, giving a fuller sound.

Be sure the piano has 88 keys! Old English pianos, which have only 85 keys, are pretty to look

at but frequently have serious internal problems. There are also some pianos made with even fewer keys. While handy if you have very limited space, these are not suitable for serious piano study.

**JOINT DECISION:** If possible, at least two people should participate in the buying decision. One may pay more attention to how the piano will look in the room it is to be placed in, or if it has a pretty sound. The other may pay closer attention to the mechanics, such as whether all the keys actually play, whether the pedals work, and how it will be moved. Each will bring different amounts of background knowledge into the decision making process.

**HISTORY:** Whenever you are interested in a particular piano, be sure to **ALWAYS** ask if the piano has been maintained and tuned regularly by a qualified piano technician. If it has, get his name and phone number, and consult with him before making a final decision. Unfortunately, many pianos are sold because they have NOT been used in a long time and therefore have NOT been maintained. Ask if it was played hard or stored in an unregulated environment. These will shorten its life and value.

**HOW IT LOOKS:** Look at the piano at a distance and close up. Look at it from the side and the front. Imagine how it would look in the room where you will put it. If you are not satisfied with that, it doesn't even matter how it sounds or works; go on to the next one.

Look inside both the upper and lower half of the piano to see if it is clean, if it has signs of rodent or insect infestation, or if the felt hammers and dampers show moth damage or excessive wear. Notice if there are small pieces of white or yellow plastic lying around. Plastic action parts used in some pianos during the 1940's by now have gotten brittle and crumbled, needing replacement. Look at the bass strings. They should look cop-

per colored, not black or dark green, which will probably make them sound dull or dead.

**HOW IT SOUNDS:** Play all the keys, black and white. Each note should sound clearly when the key is pressed down firmly, and quit sounding when the key is released. If they don't, repairs are needed. All notes should have about the same loudness when the keys are struck with the same force. If there is a great difference between some notes and others, some type of repair or regulation is needed. If some notes sound twice or several times when the key is only pressed once lightly, the action needs regulation. If there are loud clicking or clunking sounds when the key is released, the action felts are badly worn and need replacing. If the bass notes sound dead, the strings may need replacing, the soundboard may be cracked, or the bridge may have come unglued - all very expensive repairs.

**HOW IT FEELS:** The "touch" of a piano is important. Some people prefer a lighter touch, others a stiffer touch. Each note should sound when the key is pressed down firmly. No key should require an extra heavy push to get the same sound as the others. Look along the tops of the white keys. They should be even. If not, some adjustments are most likely needed, though this is not too critical in the first couple of years of piano lessons as long as all the keys function smoothly and equally. Also, check out the pedals. They should operate smoothly with your heel resting on the floor.

Some pianos have the keyboard a little lower, which may be fine for children and shorter adults, but average adults will feel like the piano is sitting on their legs. Be sure to sit down at the piano on its bench to see if the height seems comfortable.

**HOW MUCH IT COSTS:** A used vertical piano over 40 years old, which looks, sounds, and feels good, can cost from \$700 to \$1700 depending on the brand name and the care it has received.

Newer pianos may cost more. Older pianos in the upper price range have probably had some major repair or restoration work done to them. That's good. Sometimes a piano can be had for only the cost or trouble of moving it. While that may seem like a bargain, be sure that you check it out just as you would one that would cost \$700 or more. I have found that older pianos will often (not always) require an additional \$200 or more in repairs (not including tuning) to get them to an acceptable working condition.

**AGE AND BRANDS:** There are still pianos in use today that are between 50 and 100 years old, or more. The older a piano is, of course, the more likely it is to have problems, unless it has been properly maintained all along. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were hundreds of piano manufacturers in the United States. Most of them have gone out of business, although other companies may have bought out their names. European pianos are often very good too. If you can locate the serial number of the piano, frequently in an oval shaped area above the tuning pins, or stamped in the wood on the back of the piano, take that and manufacturer's name to your local library and research them in the PIERCE PIANO ATLAS to find out the year of manufacture.

**TUNING AND MAINTENANCE:** The piano is a mechanical instrument. All machines require some sort of regular maintenance. Following the initial repairs and tunings, which your used piano may require, plan to have your piano tuned each year. If it is played an hour or more each day, tuning it twice a year may be necessary. Tunings may cost between \$80 and \$120 each. Charges for repairs and adjustments to the action are extra, though some minor work may be included with the tuning fee, especially for regular customers.

If your used piano is more than 20 years old and it came with a heater bar (dehumidifier bar), do not plug it in unless the piano will be kept in a

humid environment. Prolonged heat from these bars over many years can dry out the wood excessively and do more harm than good.

**MOVING:** The combined string tension of a tuned piano is several thousand pounds. The plate onto which the strings are mounted is made of cast iron because it is strong and relatively inexpensive. However, it is also very heavy. Two strong men may be able to move a spinet piano without much trouble. (Be careful that belt buckles don't scratch the finish.) Larger pianos may require the help of additional men. If you rent a truck, also rent a furniture dolly and protective pads. It may be best to contact a professional mover with experience in moving pianos. Be sure that their insurance will cover damages that they may cause. Their services for a local move could cost between \$150 and \$350, depending on piano size, distance being moved, and whether it must be carried up stairs.

**PLEASE CALL:** I hope that this information has been helpful. It is my desire, both as a music educator and as a piano technician, that your piano bring you many years of musical satisfaction. Please call me if you have any questions, if you want me to help you evaluate a particular piano, or when you are ready for me to service your piano. Also, check out the useful information on my web page:

<http://aftune.angelfire.com>

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