

## **COMMON MYTHS ABOUT PIANOS**

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### **MYTH #1 - PIANOS SHOULD BE TUNED EVERY SIX MONTHS.**

Not all pianos are the same. Generally, new pianos need more frequent tunings (3 or 4 times a year) for the first couple of years. But some brands do better than others. Older pianos in good condition are often more stable and need less frequent tunings, maybe once every year or two. I have seen some brands hold their tuning for several years, while others go extremely out of tune in just 3 or 4 months.

Your piano technician can judge which is best for your piano based on how much the pitch varies between tunings, a knowledge of how much the piano is used, and the environmental conditions. If you are not comfortable with his assessment, you can always solicit the opinions of other piano technicians.

If pitch stability is a continuing problem, the installation of a humidity control system may be necessary.

### **MYTH #2 - IT DOESN'T NEED TUNING BECAUSE NOBODY PLAYS IT.**

Unfortunately, the steel wires used for piano "strings" will gradually lose their tension whether or not the piano is played. As the tension decreases, the musical pitch of each string goes lower. I have found that in general, pianos between 15 and 30 years old will drop in pitch about 3% to 5% a year. (New pianos drop in pitch faster.) Every 2 or 3 years, the piano should still be tuned up to pitch even if it is not used. This will enable the strings to keep their proper tension and make the piano usable

in case someone visits unexpectedly and wants to play it. It's embarrassing to have to say to visitors, "I'm sorry the piano is so out of tune."

A piano sitting idle for several years will still collect dust, even on the inside! It may even be the safe haven for insects and other living pests. When the piano technician comes to tune the piano, ask him inspect the inside and inform you if there are any other problems that should be taken care of.

Keeping your piano properly maintained will ensure a higher resale value if you decide to sell it. If you decide to give it to someone you care for, you will be more appreciated.

### **MYTH #3 - DON'T PLACE THE PIANO AGAINST AN OUTSIDE WALL.**

House construction has changed over the last 100 years. Now, with better insulation in the walls, this is not such an important consideration. More important factors in considering placement are: How does it look? Is there adequate lighting to read the music? How does its sound there? Can the technician access the tuning pins easily enough, or remove the action if necessary?

Be sure to locate it such that no direct sunlight is on it and so that it is not in the line of fire from heater or air conditioner vents. And certainly do not place it near a radiator or a fireplace. Also consider the effects of opening doors or windows nearby. The rule of thumb - avoid extremes of temperature and humidity.

### **MYTH #4. PIANOS SHOULD ALWAYS BE TUNED AFTER MOVING.**

Not necessarily. If the piano sounds OK to you and everything seems to be working fine, it is alright to wait until the next regular tuning time. But, if you have any doubts, you might

want the technician to come and check it out for you just to be sure. This will generally incur a minimum service call fee rather than a full tuning fee, depending on your technician's policies.

If the tuning is due in May, and you know you will be moving to a new house in June, for instance, you may want to wait until after the move, and then give the piano a couple of weeks to acclimate to its new environment before having it tuned. If the move is within the same house and no rough handling is involved, it may be OK to wait for the next scheduled tuning.

I was tuning a new piano that had been rented for a party. It involved a pitch raise before I could do the fine tuning. When the pitch raise was done, it sounded pretty good. Then I found that it had to be moved about 15 feet in order to be located properly for the invited pianist. The wheels were metal, and the patio floor had a very rough pebble surface. The short move jarred the piano so much that it was extremely out of tune. Good thing I was still there!

### **MYTH #5 - COVERING THE KEYS WILL CAUSE THEM TO DISCOLOR.**

The yellowing of ivory key tops and some of the early plastic key tops is a result of aging rather than the absence of light.

I prefer that the lid be kept closed when not in use to reduce the accumulation of dust on the unplayed or seldom played keys.

Some pianos, however, have the music desk incorporated into the key cover, so closing it each time could be annoying. Keeping it open also encourages more playing. If the cover must be kept open, be sure to clean the keys regularly. A cloth cover will also help prevent dust accumulation.

**MYTH #6 - TUNING A PROFESSIONAL GRADE PIANO IS DIFFERENT FROM TUNING A CHEAP ONE.**

While it is true that better materials and workmanship go into the "top of the line" pianos, the basic engineering, and therefore the basic tuning techniques are the same for any modern piano. It makes no sense to pay double for a tuning just because you have a more expensive piano. I have worked on pianos all over the spectrum in quality and price, and have found virtually no difference in how I work to get them in good tune.

**MYTH #7 - BUY A CHEAP PIANO FOR YOUR CHILD TO SEE HOW WELL HE DOES AT PIANO LESSONS.**

This may sound like an economically sound plan; after all, we might reason, we wouldn't buy a new Cadillac for a teenager after getting his first driver license, would we?

It is true that students who play on instruments that sound good and work well generally do better than those who attempt to play inferior instruments. But also important is the role that parents and teachers play in encouraging and motivating the student to succeed. Talent may be a strong factor in ultimate success, but hard work can often trump talent.

Before buying or renting a piano, whether new or used, it would be a good investment to hire a trustworthy piano technician to check it out for you. Also, please get a copy of my brochure "Before You Buy A Used Piano", available on my web page.

Here's the rule of thumb I would recommend: Get the best quality piano you can afford.

**MYTH #8 - A STRING COVER WILL MUFFLE THE PIANO'S SOUND.**

Whether a luxurious 100% wool string cover with wood battens and fancy embroidery, or a simple 70% wool cover that your technician makes while in your home, the string cover will not muffle the sound significantly. Some sensitive listeners or players may notice a slight change, but the advantage of having a string cover in place to protect the grand piano against dirt, moisture, etc., far outweighs the slight reduction in sound that only a very few people will notice.

**MYTH #9 - PIANOS SHOULD BE BROUGHT UP TO PITCH GRADUALLY OVER SEVERAL TUNINGS TO AVOID STRING BREAKAGE.**

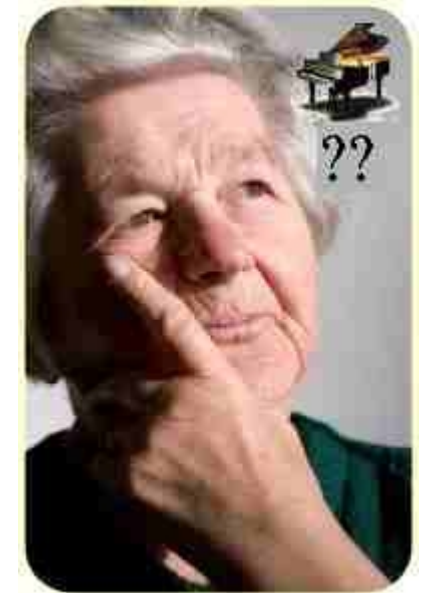
I seldom find pianos more than a whole step (200%) flat. Most neglected pianos I tune are not even a half step (100%) flat.

There are several factors which increase the chances of string breakage. Very old strings, 80 years old or more, have lost most of their elasticity, and are likely to break even if they are only a half step flat. Rusty strings are also more prone to breakage. Other factors include defective strings and loose tuning pins.

Generally speaking, though, unless a piano is more than 300% flat, one or two pitch raises and a fine tuning can be completed on the same visit by the technician. It may take two more tunings during the following year for the tuning to become stable enough to not drop in pitch significantly between regular tunings.

If your technician uses a computerized tuning aid, the pitch raise can be calculated more accurately and the tuning may last longer.

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