

CHOOSING A PIANO: Is Your Piano Helping or Hurting?

Often students and parents ask which piano to buy and how much it should cost. The answer is simple: Buy the best piano you can afford or a bit more than you can afford because you cannot lose on your financial investment or on the investment in your child.

I am not in the piano business but I am in the business of teaching people to play them. I know that the best possible instrument will produce the best possible musician. There is a direct relationship between the quality of the instrument and the progress of the student. In addition, there is a subliminal message delivered to the perspective student that describes just how committed and serious his/her parents are about professional piano lessons and a good music education. A less worthy instrument will not help to incite practice, instill a love for the instrument, and develop a good sense of pitch and a fine technique. When choosing a piano, ask yourself "will this piano help or will it hurt?"

A good piano is one that has a high quality tone, not tinny or shallow but round and warm, lasts long and seems to fill the room with vibrations. The keys are the correct size (not all are) and when depressed provides a good resistance and sinks fairly deep into the key bed. Keys that are shallow and have no resistance will never allow the hand and finger muscles to develop properly so that each finger becomes strong and independent and capable of creating a variety of colors. When striking the key the key bed should provide a cushioning under each finger in order to decrease the degree of shock sent up into the finger bones and joints. The keys should have a smooth surface and be free from cracks and chips.

Furthermore, a good piano should have a fully functioning damper pedal (the one on the right) and a fully functioning una corda pedal (the one on the left). Both pedals are vital to learning to play the piano well. These pedals should provide a good and rather strong resistance and have at least 1 1/2 inches of depth. Properly adjusted pedals are just as essential as properly weighted keys. A balanced resistance in the pedals provides another vehicle for controlling the expression and accuracy of the performance. There is a middle pedal, which changes function with each piano manufacturer and instrument size. The better pianos have a middle pedal called a sostenuto pedal, which Steinway & Sons patented in the late 1800's. It differs from the damper pedal because it suspends one damper at a time rather than the entire 88 at a time. It is a most useful and even essential pedal for French literature.

Finally, a good piano has a strong music rack placed not too high above the keys and allows for easy reach and freedom when turning pages. It should be adjustable and accessible to a good lamp. The cabinet (furniture) is consequential since the wood itself and its quality will aid in the tone production. Often people shop primarily for the furniture aspect such as the style and type of finish rather than for the quality of instrumental design. Shopping for a piano is very different from picking out a coordinating sofa.

The expense is always a consideration but a good piano is a sound financial investment. The brand name does make a difference; much like that of a car. A Lincoln or a Cadillac is more money but has a good reputation with excellent trade-in value. Boston or Steinway will cost more but they will also increase in value over the years and last a lifetime. The size of the instrument will also play a role in determining the price. Bigger is not always better. The size of the instrument should relate directly to the size of the room that houses the piano. Good piano dealers will be able to calculate exactly what size of a piano will work best for a particular room. The door and window placement also play a part in this calculation. Therefore, always take a drawing of the room and its dimensions to the dealer.

Care of the instrument is very important as well. Just like an automobile's oil changes, pianos require periodic maintenance, which includes tuning and action adjustments. Temperature and humidity changes do affect both of these areas. The soundboard is particularly susceptible to these changes and therefore, should be made of a high quality wood. When shaped and positioned correctly, it will produce a beautiful tone and allow for its natural expansion and contraction. All pianos go out of tune and most piano tuners

will tell you that a tuning should occur once every six months. A less expensive piano however, should not be tuned more than once a year because the tuning pins on cheaper pianos have a tendency to slip out of place and regular tuning will only exacerbate the problem. Therefore, keeping a cheaper piano in tune is very difficult and even annoying. Regular tuning provides the student with accurate pitch, which develops good pitch perception. Please keep in mind that when learning to play the piano one also must learn to listen and hear. Accurate pitch is vital to receiving a good music education. Steinway or Boston pianos can withstand daily tuning without any concern.

Grand piano owners should remember to always keep the lid closed especially if you are not in the room. Lids have fallen off their sticks. In addition, a closed lid will protect everyone from a broken string springing up from the case at a staggering velocity. Trust me; you do not want that to happen. Besides, a closed lid protects the action mechanism and strings from dust and grease.

I have not mentioned yet digital pianos such as the Yamaha Clavinova. Digital is an excellent choice for a variety of reasons. The action is almost like that of an acoustic instrument and the tone quality is superb. There are a variety of types, styles, and accessories from which to choose. You can even purchase earphones and not disturb anyone or not be disturbed by anyone while practicing. As much as I like the digital instruments and find them most useful in the studio, they do have drawbacks. These instruments are computers and like computers, they decrease in value over time because the technology continues to change and improve. In addition, the keys may begin to weaken and produce some very audible noise when played; and finally, they are only a sample or recording of a piano tone. No matter how good the sound is it is not real. In my mind, there is no substitute for a genuine acoustic instrument with an authentic touch and sound.

I hope these observations will help everyone who is looking for a piano or is thinking about upgrading. I am always available to help and advise. I have friends in the business that can be of service as well. Just let me know!