



## WHY SHOULD I BUY A PIANO, INSTEAD OF A KEYBOARD?

The quick answer is: if you want your child to play the piano, then buy a piano. Playing a keyboard does not make a pianist.

And now the more thoughtful answer, because it really depends on your long-range goals.

Periodically, during the prospective student interview, I'll hear "we have a friend who has a keyboard we can borrow. Is that okay?". Like so many electronic items on the market today, keyboards vary greatly in the terms of price, capabilities and quality.

If you are buying an instrument for a child who is just starting to take lessons, you might not want to make an investment in a piano, which is understandable. A keyboard may be a temporary solution. But notice that I said "temporary".

Possible reasons to buy a keyboard:

- COST
- PORTABILITY
- HAS LOTS OF EXTRAS (bells & whistles!)
- DOESN'T NEED TUNING

Unfortunately, that's about all keyboards have going for them. And that's not enough, if you want to play piano.

A keyboard is **not** a substitute for a real piano. I play a keyboard for dances and other gigs, so I know they can be useful. But I would **never** pass up the chance to play a piano, instead.

See whether you can rent one for a few months -- or, if you have to buy it, make sure you can get a full trade when you move up to a piano. Reputable music stores may offer one or both of those options.

It is the studio requirement at Heywood Studios that beginning students have unlimited access to either an acoustic piano or a digital keyboard (touch sensitive—or weighted keys) have a minimum of 60 keys, music rack, bench, sustain pedal and proper keyboard stand. 'Unlimited access' means it must be in their home. Having the piano or keyboard at a different location makes it extremely difficult to establish and ensure regular practicing.

A touch sensitive keyboard is one in which the student can produce loud and soft tones without adjusting the volume control. A good keyboard should have 88 full size keys as opposed to the mini or  $\frac{3}{4}$  length keys. An easy way to check the size of the keys is to be



sure the white keys are the length of a dollar bill. The keys should be weighted, so that they push down with the same resistance no matter where they're pressed. If you can put your fingers under the keys, they are NOT weighted. If a student is playing on a keyboard without these features and then goes to their piano lesson where the instrument is a different quality, he/she will be unable to achieve the same results—frustration will set in at an early stage. A sustain pedal is the fourth required feature. Most

method courses begin to introduce the damper pedal during the middle of their first books. Other added features that you should look for when renting or purchasing a keyboard would be a built-in metronome, and headphones.

The reason to buy a real piano, instead of a keyboard, is that they are very different kinds of instruments that just happen to look similar. Roller skates and pickup trucks have many similarities, but they handle very differently and you probably wouldn't want to haul furniture on roller skates....

One of the most difficult things about playing the piano is learning how to control the instrument. A student will probably learn how to read music (and better learn how to keep time), but without good control, nothing will feel right or sound right.

And good control of the piano depends on hand strength (which a keyboard does not develop) and "finesse", being able to move the keys in different ways to make different sorts of sounds. Keyboards don't help with that, either.

A last point, while I'm on the subject.... How good should your first piano be? A new player won't know the difference, right, so you might as well get the cheapest one you can find, right?



**NO!!!**

A new student needs the best piano you can afford, because that player doesn't know how to control the instrument yet, and an out-of-whack piano can be very frustrating and actually form bad habits.

So, if you're tempted at the option of that FREE upright piano in Grandma's basement—think again. Much like a 'used car', there are factors to consider when thinking about that great, low price (or FREE!) used piano. Give-away pianos are, in general, not a "bargain", usually found in horrendous, dolorous condition requiring much repairs, and expensive tuning! Some sellers may tell you their piano is an 'antique'—but, unlike a great Chippendale desk, an old piano is just that—**an old piano**. Before you get a crew together to haul that piano (grand, vertical spinet, console, studio or upright) out of Grandma's basement, do your homework! 1) Test all the keys, make sure the keyboard, pedals and hammers do not stick or squeak. 2) Listen when you test the entire keyboard. Did each key played sound like one note or two? 3) Open the top of the piano to be sure all the strings and hammers are in place and in working order. Check for moth holes in felts. Is there mildew damage on the wood case and parts? Do you see rust on the strings and tuning pins? 4) Ask for a history of ownership. 5) Give the brand name and serial number to your piano technician to check the age of the piano. 6) If you think you may want to purchase a particular piano, hire a qualified Registered Piano Technician (RPT), member of the Piano Technicians Guild, for consultation and to inspect the piano with you.

Finally, when you finally make the decision to upgrade to that acoustic piano, be sure to have it maintained regularly. Pianos are like automobiles—it needs regular 'tune ups' to ensure the value of your instrument. The humidity in the room makes a big difference in the tuning—nominally, the humidity level year around should stay at 42%. In Wisconsin, that's tough to do!

The piano is a highly developed, complicated piece of instrument. It

contains about 240 different lengths of highly tensioned wire; in other words, approximately 160 lbs. per note, and a 15% increase in the bass, giving you an overall strain on the piano frame of approximately 18-20 tons of pressure. These lengths of wire make up 85 to 88 notes, spread across the musical range. In addition, for each note, there exists a mechanism, which in the case of an upright piano, contains up to 14 different moving parts. In the case of a grand, up to 22 parts moving parts, per note.

Since the piano must be maintained at a specific tension to achieve a good musical sound, the matter of maintenance becomes an on-going process. Since a piano consists mainly of wood and iron, all of this is subject to movement. The movement of the wooden soundboard, framework, causes the wires to change tension without prompting by the user. Thus, it becomes necessary to set up a minimal schedule of every six months for tuning the instrument to ensure reliable and pleasant results. Routine service maintenance of tuning and periodic regulation adjustments of the playing mechanism is important!

Heywood Studios requires that all families have their pianos tuned annually by a Certified Technician. Regularly scheduled

tuning is important—whether you play the piano every day or not! Pianos that have not been tuned for more than five years may not 'hold their pitch'. And NO—do not attempt to tune the piano yourself. Tuning a piano is a procedure not as easy as it looks, because you are dealing with over 200 piano strings and wires that have a combined total of 20 to 30 tons of tension. If you do not know what you are doing, you can break strings, break the piano's cast iron frame, or hurt yourself or others. Save your handiwork for something else, and allow the certified piano technician to tune the piano. Most tunings cost between \$60-75.00 per visit.

With any luck at all, you'll be upgrading to a high quality acoustic piano after a year of lessons. At Mitchell Piano Works there are affordable 'rent to buy' options as well as seasonal sales with low rates on financing some terrific Yamaha pianos. A budding musician is only as good as his instrument!

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