How Should I Take Care of My Piano?

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A piano brings a lifetime of enjoyment to you and your family. As you might expect with any investment of this size, a piano requires periodic servicing to provide outstanding performance year after year. But to understand what maintenance is required, it's important to understand the nature of the piano.

The beautiful, natural sound of a piano is due to the remarkable blending of such materials as wood, metal, buckskin, and wool. Together they create a uniquely timeless sound that no other instrument in the world can duplicate. While electronic synthesizers may approximate the sound of an acoustic piano, they cannot approach the true beauty of the real thing.

How should I care for my piano's wood finish?

As with any piece of fine furniture, keeping drinks off finished wood surfaces is a simple rule always to follow. New piano finishes generally require only occasional cleaning with either a dry or damp cotton cloth. Older piano finishes may benefit from an occasional polishing with a good quality polish, but frequent polishing is not recommended. The PTG technical bulletin on finish care discusses this subject in detail.

What is the piano's action and why does it need maintenance?

When you look inside your piano, you'll find a cast iron plate or "harp" strung with steel and copper-wound strings over a large expanse of wood which is the soundboard. If you look closer, you'll discover an intricate system of levers, springs, and hammers connected to the keyboard.

The complex system which causes a hammer to strike a string when you press a key is called the piano's *action*. It is a marvel of engineering composed largely of wood and wool felt. This mechanism needs to be responsive to every nuance of the pianist's touch -- from loud, thunderous chords to soft, delicate passages. We have technical drawings available for both vertical and grand piano actions.

When a piano leaves the factory, each of its parts is adjusted to a tolerance of a few thousandths of an inch. This process is called *action regulation*. Because the wood and felt parts of the action may change dimension due to humidity and wear, the action must be serviced occasionally to maintain its responsive qualities.

How does humidity affect my piano?

Extreme swings from hot to cold or dry to wet are harmful to your piano. Dryness causes the piano's pitch to go flat; moisture makes it go sharp. Repeated swings in relative humidity can cause soundboards to crack or distort. Extreme dryness also can weaken the glue joints that hold the soundboard and other wood portions of the piano together. Moisture may lead to string rust. A piano functions best under fairly consistent conditions which are neither too wet or dry, optimally at a temperature of 68 degrees F and 42 percent relative humidity.

Using an air conditioner in humid summer months and adding a humidifier to your central heating system will reduce the extremes of high and low humidity. Room humidifiers and dehumidifiers, as well as systems designed to be installed inside of pianos will control humidity-related disorders still further. The PTG technical bulletin on humidity control discusses this topic in further detail.

What is voicing?

A piano also periodically requires a service called *voicing*. Because the tone changes as the felt hammers wear, periodic voicing of the hammers is necessary so that your piano will have an even, full tone throughout the entire scale, and produce the widest possible dynamic range. The PTG technical bulletin on voicing discusses this subject in further detail.

How often should I have my piano fully serviced?

The three components of musical performance that need to be adjusted periodically are pitch, tone, and touch. Tone is maintained by voicing, and touch by servicing the piano action, called *regulation*.. Piano tuning is the adjustment of the tuning pins so that all the strings are of the proper tension (pitch), to have the correct sounding, musical intervals.

An out-of-tune piano or an unresponsive touch can discourage even novice musicians. Regular maintenance also can prevent expensive repair in the future.

Most manufacturers recommend servicing at least two to four times a year to keep the piano sounding good and working properly each time you sit down to play. This is especially important the first year of your piano's life. Some tuning instability should be anticipated

during the first year because of the elasticity of the piano wire, combined with the piano's normal adjustment to the humidity changes in your home. A piano which has gone a long time without tuning may require extra work in pitch raising. But most importantly, be sure the regular servicing of your piano is performed by a qualified piano technician.