Tips on Buying a Piano

Q. What is the first step towards purchasing a piano for my family?

A. Purchasing a piano for your family can create a lifetime of enjoyment and intellectual stimulation. Before you spend money for either a new or used piano, a little preparation is helpful so that you purchase a piano that is appropriate for your needs and will insure your family's musical success. The first step in choosing a piano involves establishing your musical and furniture needs to fulfill your dreams. A piano will provide elegance, sophistication and beauty to your home, so you want an instrument that will play properly and compliment your home's décor. Musically, you need to select a piano that has the key *touch* and musical *tone* that you like. The best way to accomplish this is to visit your local retail piano dealer. Find a dealer that has a large selection of new and used pianos at various prices. It is important that you sample or have the salesperson demonstrate a wide variety of pianos. When you play each piano, discover which piano keyboard has the *touch* most responsive to your fingers. Listen to many pianos to discover which *tone* is most appealing. You will also have an opportunity to view different cabinet and finish styles so you can select a piano that is attractive in your home. Once you discover what you want to purchase, and have an idea of the cost, you can either purchase a new or used piano from the retail dealer or attempt to locate a used piano privately.

Q. What are the differences between buying a piano from a retail dealer or a private individual?

A. When purchasing a new or used piano from a retail dealer, you'll find:

- new pianos usually come with a manufacturers warranty, a complimentary tuning, moving, and more cabinetry and finish choices.
- used pianos are generally reconditioned, and they usually come with a dealer warranty, moving and complimentary tuning.
- many dealers have a trade up policy that will give you the full purchased price of your piano when you desire a higher quality piano.
- you can expect to pay a little more for the manufacturers warranty, and the advantage of selecting a piano from a wide variety of new and used instruments.

To locate and purchase a piano privately, look in the newspaper classified ads. The Internet also has some opportunities for locating a piano. The best way to locate a used piano is to find a Registered Piano Technician (RPT) in your area. Often they are aware of used pianos for sale, and more importantly are aware of the piano's condition. If you are determined to locate a piano on your own, you are at risk buying a piano without having a Registered Piano Technician (RPT) evaluate the condition and appraise the value of the piano.

When purchasing a used piano privately, you'll find:

- they are generally less expensive than retail, assuming the seller has a realistic understanding of the value and condition of their piano.
- your search requires extra travel to several homes to locate a suitable piano.
- there is no warranty.
- the moving cost is usually the responsibility of buyer.
- less selection in furniture cabinetry and finish.
- that extra service is often required to restore the piano's *touch* and *tone* .

Despite the obvious drawbacks and hidden costs of purchasing a used piano privately, you can still do fine as long as you allow a Registered Piano Technician (RPT) act as your guardian angel to guide you through this potentially confusing purchase. Although it is possible for a technician to make some recommendations by telephone on site evaluations are a good investment and can prevent costly errors.

Q. How much money is required to purchase a piano for my family?

A. *Pianos are like anything else, you get what you pay for!* If your goal is to have music provide a lifetime of enjoyment and intellectual stimulation for your children, you need to seriously consider making a reasonable investment in their future. What most people do not realize is that young children actually require a piano with keys that are very *touch* sensitive. With their small fingers, if the piano keyboard mechanism is not adjusted properly, the children will have great difficulty achieving success. Purchasing a quality piano will substantially increase your child's success. When students play on a quality piano with *touch* sensitivity and good *tone*, they are not just playing musical notes. They can “feel” the music and have the music penetrate deep into their hearts and minds.

Parents that successfully incorporate musical training into their children's educational curriculum generally purchase a high quality new or used piano. They recognize the more resources and parental guidance they provide for their children's education, the more successful and well adjusted they will be as adults. Also, intuitive parents understand that children do not always *listen* to their advice and instructions. But they understand that their children pay close attention to their *actions* . When you purchase a quality new or used piano, they truly understand that musical training is an important part of their education. Purchasing a quality piano demonstrates through *actions* the value you place on their education and wellbeing.

Q. How can I tell if a used piano is in good condition?

A. Often problems that don't seem that big are major problems and vice versa. Keys that don't play are usually not a big problem. Often something has broken or come unglued which is easily fixed. There are a few older pianos with old plastic action parts that are problematic.

Look for notes that sound terribly out of tune when played by themselves. Most of the piano has three strings per note. The strings wrap around a steel tuning pin which is set into a wooden pinblock. When the pinblock goes bad it can't hold the tuning pins tightly and a tuning pin will slip. This leaves one of the three strings very flat to the others. This is not just an out of tune honky-tonk sound, but it will sound like you are playing two distinct notes. A bad pinblock may very well be the end of that piano if it is not a good enough piano to warrant rebuilding. On a high quality piano such as a Steinway, Baldwin, or Mason & Hamlin it may be worth doing a major rebuilding and replace the pinblock, but these pianos are considerably more expensive if purchased new and would therefore warrant the work.

Another serious problem is the presence of strange rattles or buzzes. The soundboard, which is the large wooden board you can see from the back of an upright piano or from underneath a grand, has ribs glued on it to strengthen it. Sometimes when the soundboard gets cracks in it the ribs come unglued from it in places. This can allow the soundboard to rattle against the loose rib as it vibrates. This can sound like a speaker distorting when it is played too loudly. Pianos have a wooden bridge which is attached to the soundboard and has the strings running over it. The bridges have two pins for each string to hold the strings in place. Because there are so many pins very close together, sometimes the bridges split and allow the pins to become loose. This allows the strings to rattle against the loose pins. Bridges are often made in sections that can come unglued from each other also causing buzzes and rattles.

Look at the hammers for deep grooves cause by the strings. Layers of felt can be removed to restore the rounded shape to the hammer but eventually there in not enough felt left above the wooden molding to get a good tone. The high treble has the least amount of felt and you can sometimes see that the felt is all the way worn through and that the wood molding is actually striking the strings. Hammer replacement is fairly expensive and the piano needs to be good quality to warrant this work. You can't just replace the felt on the hammers. The felt is put on the moldings in special presses under tons of pressure.