

How to Buy a Used Piano

By Ben Frostad, CPT

As a piano technician, I often receive phone calls and emails from people who want advice on buying a used piano. Looking for a used piano can be a daunting task, and the plethora of used instruments on the market only adds to that. What brands should one avoid? How do you know if the piano is in decent shape? What makes a piano good or bad? These questions and more are all important in finding a suitable instrument.

The first question to address is: Are you sure you want a used piano? Why not a new piano? Most of the time, the main incentive for buying a used piano is budget. Obviously new pianos are more expensive. Why pay more if you can find a good quality used instrument for less money? There are, however, some things to keep in mind. Used pianos usually do not come with a warranty like new ones do, and there will naturally be more wear and tear on the instrument. Also, while new piano prices are somewhat standardized (at least to a certain extent), a piano owner can list their used instrument for any price they want, which may or may not reflect the actual value of the instrument. There are many fine used pianos out there, but buying used is always riskier.

Buying a used piano is similar to buying a used car. The price that the seller is asking for may or may not be a good deal. Even pianos that are being given away for "free" may not be worth the price or effort of moving them. And a piano may look good on the outside, but that isn't always an indication of what is going on "under the hood." With used pianos, you don't always know what you're getting into. Depending on how old the piano is, you may run into issues with parts being worn out or the instrument losing tuning stability. And you don't necessarily get what you pay for. It's possible to find amazing deals, but it's also possible to find highly overpriced instruments.

The biggest piece of advice anyone in the industry will offer is to hire a piano technician to inspect a used piano before you buy it. If you are considering buying a particular piano, get a professional to look at it first. Only a technician can properly assess certain aspects of the instrument. It takes a trained hand to feel whether the tuning pins are tight enough in the pinblock for the piano to hold its tune properly. It takes someone with experience to know whether the hammers are too old or worn to improve on the voicing (tone) of the instrument.

Short of hiring a technician, there are things you can watch out for. There are a lot of used pianos on the market, and sometimes you need to narrow down your choice first. Here are three suggestions: Firstly, I am often asked if there are any particular brands that are desirable or that are to be avoided. Obviously there are many aspects to a piano that would have to be assessed on an individual basis, and blanket statements about different brands aren't always useful. Instead of focussing on brand, my suggestion would be to avoid, if possible, these two categories of pianos: unrestored pre-WWII uprights (the old tall ones) and "short" pianos (anything less than 43-45" tall for an upright, or under 5' for a grand). If you can avoid those two categories you will weed out a lot of pianos that are either poor quality or past their prime. Also, when it comes to grand vs. upright (vertical) pianos, it is true that a good quality grand will perform better than an

upright due to the nature of its action. But it is much better to buy a high-end upright than a cheap grand. Although a grand piano carries more prestige with it and usually has more aesthetic appeal, a short or cheaply-built grand will not have as good touch and tone as a good quality upright.

Secondly, do your own amateur assessment of the instrument. Here are some things you can watch out for: (1) For starters, it is very important to play any piano that you are considering purchasing. It is essential that the pianist likes the sound and feel of the instrument. Always try playing the piano before you buy it. Even if you don't know how to play the piano or you don't have a piece to play, just run your fingers up and down the keys and see how you like the sound and the feel. Play every single note and make sure the keys go up and down properly and make a sound. (2) If the keys have a loose or rattly feel to them, that may indicate the action is quite worn. Also see if you notice rattling noises or other strange sounds on certain notes. (3) If the lid opens easily, take a look at the hammers and see if they are deeply grooved by the strings. This is often an indication of how worn the instrument is. String marks deeper than a few millimetres may indicate an instrument that has received a lot of use. (4) You can look at the soundboard, either from the back or by opening the bottom panel on the front, and check if you can see any large cracks. A crack or two in the soundboard isn't the end of the world, and doesn't always affect the sound or quality of the instrument (contrary to popular theory). But if it is severely cracked, it may be an indication of other problems. (5) And, of course, the condition of the cabinet (outside) is worth considering. This usually goes without saying.

Thirdly, do your research and see what is available. I always encourage people who are in the market for a piano to visit some stores that sell new pianos, even if you're determined to buy used. Talk to the salespeople about the differences in quality, grand vs. upright pianos, and differences in tone. If you can, try to play a number of different pianos, including new ones to get a sense for what a good piano feels and sounds like. Make sure that any piano you are considering has a touch and tone that the pianist likes.

An excellent book that every person who owns or intends to buy a piano should have is *The Piano Book* by Larry Fine. That book goes into much more detail on how to buy a piano (new or used), comparing different makes, as well as how to properly maintain your piano. Another resource (also by Larry Fine) that is available for free online is the website www.pianobuyer.com.

And last, but not least, an indispensable resource that can help you buy a piano is your piano teacher. In many cases, the teacher will be able to offer the best advice on whether or not a particular piano is suitable for the level of the student.

They say in sales that the goal is to find a perfect match between the buyer and the product. Obviously, if cost is an issue, the best quality instrument is not always the perfect match for the buyer. Buying a less-expensive piano because of a lower budget doesn't mean you got a bad deal, or that it was a waste of money. But in the end you want a piano that meets the needs of the pianist, and that offers musical pleasure for years to come.