

## Acoustic Piano or A Digital Piano-Which One Should I Get?

Allen Cook, April 2019

The answer to that question depends on many things: your goals, your budget, the type of music you want to play, the amount of space in your home...just to name a few.

You may also want to also consider: moving and maintenance costs (regular tuning for acoustic pianos, having parts replaced as needed), the flexibility to connect a keyboard to a computer, and portability.

Some teachers will suggested getting a real (acoustic) piano instead of a digital. And there are others who will only accept students with real acoustic pianos.

If your goal is pursuing and/or performing serious classical music, then a really good piano is the way to go. A tall modern upright or grand is the best choice for realizing the subtleties of true piano expression, technique development, and touch response. Good quality grand pianos are superior to uprights in touch response because the action is designed to be exactly that...more responsive. If you're playing for personal enjoyment, a digital is fine.

Digital piano technology has advanced considerably. This new breed of computerized instruments, especially the higher end models, are very convincing. Piano touch response, room acoustics simulations, as well as sampled sounds of famous concert grand pianos can be changed with the push of a button. For mid five figures and up, you can get these bells and whistles and a whole lot more: bluetooth for streaming music through the piano audio system, better cabinet resonance that simulates the real thing, premium \*graded hammer action, lots of orchestral sounds, a backup band...the list goes on.

*[\*Graded hammer action has to do with simulating touch response. Hammers in a piano are bigger in the bass end and gradually become smaller as the notes ascend. The touch response is thus heavier toward the low end and lighter toward the higher end; thus a "gradation"].*

Plus, you'll have a piano (though digital) that is more than good enough for lessons, and to play well on nor will it take up a lot of space in your home. In addition, it can be connected directly to a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation aka computer) for recording as long as you have the software and accessories.

A teacher might still prefer you to have a real piano. You'll have to work that situation out yourself!

Truth be told, any style of music can be played on acoustic or digital. If you already have piano playing skills, it really comes down to personal preference. Having both is ideal though.

Many people on a strict budget are attracted to those "free" piano offers. As a piano technician, I recommend approaching these "deals" with caution. The best practice is to have the piano in question inspected by a technician, just as you'd have a car you're interested in buying inspected by a mechanic. Most people don't look "under the hood" of a piano; but even if opened, they probably wouldn't know what to look for.

In situations where a piano is needed for the new student in the home, the free piano is appealing as a solution to the problem, a quick fix. The parents need the student to prove their interest before investing in a big piece of heavy furniture that looks like a piano. That makes perfect sense, and that

free piano is looking better all the time! Well, in far too many instances, more often than not actually, that piano isn't "free"-it might need more work to bring it up to speed than it's worth; sort of akin to a car that has lots of issues. It happens, unfortunately.

Hiring a piano technician, just the way you would call upon an auto mechanic, will save you time, frustration, money, and answer a lot of questions you didn't even know to ask!

As mentioned earlier, you must figure out where the piano will be located. If a grand piano is in your plans, keep in mind there are essentially four categories that cover the various size ranges. They're measured from the keyboard (with lid closed) to the longest end section.

- Baby Grand: 4' 8" to 5' 5"
- Living Room or Parlor Grand: 5' 7" to 6' 6"
- Half Concert or Studio Grand: 6' 6" to 7' 5"
- Concert Grand: 9'+

Uprights also have categories. These are measured from the floor to the tallest part of the cabinet.

- Spinnet: 34" to 39"
- Console: 38" to 44"
- Studio: 45" to 52" (modern uprights)
- Old Uprights: 44" 58" (pianos made long time ago; those "free" pianos are in this category!)

There are also "digital grands" with the shape and look of a baby grand, but smaller and though heavy, more portable than a piano. These often having multiple sounds, and other bells and whistles and take up just a bit more space than an upright.

As for portable digital pianos, you'll need a sturdy keyboard stand. Some have built in speakers, which are very convenient, but add a little weight. If you choose a keyboard without speakers, you'll need an amplifier, or use headphones every time you practice. Depending on your living situation, this might be highly desirable. Either way, most digital instruments have a headphone jack. This can be a real bonus for privacy and/or late night practice.

So...acoustic or digital? Follow this checklist: Check your budget. Decide on the type and style of piano. Scope out the home environment. Decide on the location. Check the classifieds. Make a list. If buying used, remember to call your friendly piano technician to inspect it once you've narrowed down your list. I recommend playing as many pianos, acoustic and digital, before making a decision. This is easier to do by visiting piano retail showrooms. Play. Feel. Listen. Two pianos of the same make and model can and often do sound quite different. Choice is highly subjective. Use all of your senses, especially your ears. Above all, trust your intuition.

Time to go shopping! Enjoy the process.

Be well! Allen