

Electronic vs. Acoustic Pianos

As with so many things in the art world, people tend to take an almost moral position in relation to their electronic-vs-acoustic piano preference. The pro-acoustic piano camp hails the sound of vibrating wood as the only true piano sound; the once-living wood somehow resonates in tune with our natural souls—like mineral water. The acoustic piano has the only true piano touch. The acoustic piano sound is the only one that will blend with other acoustic instruments.

As you may guess, I think these attitudes are extremely old-fashioned, and that they do not justify the many, many more dollars you have to spend to get quality in an acoustic piano. What you are trying to buy, when you purchase a keyboard and pay for music lessons, is a musical experience. I would like to list below some of the many advantages an electronic keyboard setup has over an acoustic piano, in realizing your efforts to grab that special musical moment.

1.) **The Money**

We music teachers always need to be up front with parents about the financial risk involved in investing in music. Music can easily become a cornerstone of a child's world, a permanent part of him/her, worth more than any price could pay. But there are many, many stories of students who got off to a good start but simply did not have what it takes to continue; and now there sits, unattended in the living room, a \$15,000 piano.

You can't tell if a student is really going to stay with music or not until he/she child has completed about two years of study. By that time everybody should know whether there is interest enough for the student to get deeper into the discipline. I'm never a believer in spending money on training equipment. A nice piano sound, a nice violin sound, these are more fun than crumby-sounding equipment, to be sure; but I have found that there is not that much difference between good equipment and better equipment until you really know how to play. However, once his/her basic technique is set, and he/she is beginning to play well, I always recommend that parents invest in at least the bottom end of the professional level,

because I train my students to be prepared for participation in professional-level music making events.

2.) **The Touch**

The biggest complaint about electronic keyboards is that the keys do not offer enough resistance to train the fingers to play with any strength—strength = control. This is certainly true, but it is not as important as you would think, for two reasons:

1.) You don't need strength when you are first learning the basic moves of piano playing—you need a coordination. Strength does not enter into it—not until you have mastered playing two hands in counterpoint, which usually takes one to two years, no matter how precocious the child is.

2.) If this plastic touch is the fate of the future, there is no point in fighting it. I'm quite sure that acoustic pianos will gradually die out over the next 20 to 30 years, and that they will have become as rare as a harpsichord is today, by the time your children are grown.

But this last is not even a good argument, because it is very easy to buy an electric keyboard which equals or surpasses most acoustic piano actions. It is true that most acoustic actions are better than most electric piano actions, but that is just because there are many, many more cheap keyboards out there. The very next step above entry level, in an electronic keyboard, offers many attractive possibilities in the touch department, not the least of which is the adjustable touch which many of the mid- and upper-range keyboards feature.

People have the mistaken idea, that just because they get an acoustic piano they are necessarily getting a better keyboard touch. This is not true; a lot of old, used, entry-level pianos from \$500 to \$3,000 have worse actions than 2nd tier \$500 to \$1,000 electric pianos. I have found that a good \$400 keyboard controller, with weighted keys, and an adjustable resistance feature, to be as serviceable as any of the best pianos I've ever played, and superior to most.

3.) **The Size**

Moving a real piano, whether it is across the room, or across town, is always a pain in the butt. An electronic keyboard can be picked up by your 7-year-old, and the more elaborate electric pianos are easily shifted around,

loaded in cars, and moved to the bedroom by two people. Some people like a grand piano because it is a nice looking piece of furniture, I myself would rather spend the money on a nice Picasso print, and save the music dollars for musical experience.

4.) **Tuning**

One of the biggest hassles owning a real piano, is keeping it in tune. I long ago gave up using piano tuners because I simply cannot afford them. Even if my piano were not in constant use, I would still have to have the piano tuned and once every three months in order to stay ahead of the shifting weather. Calling a piano tuner is a big expensive drag, and that is why so few people ever do it. I have played on very few acoustic pianos in my students' homes that were in tune—people just don't have their pianos tuned often enough, so, for years, their children have to practice ignoring the ugly sounds they make when they play. An electric keyboard never goes out of tune, and some of the advanced ones feature alternate tunings for baroque connoisseurs and the like.

5.) **Pedagogy**

The makers of electric pianos are ever more diligently including self-help training packages in even the cheapest models. Training children to use computers to help themselves is not a thing of the future, it is now. I find that music-making technique is on the rise, and the only way that music students can stay on the cutting edge is to take advantage of the learning opportunities the music hardware industry is making available to all of us.

6.) **Flexibility**

The electric piano can be practiced with headphones in the same room with TV, it can be played late at night, early in the morning; it can also be patched to an amplifier and played with a rock band. It can be a concert grand, in a big hall, in a little hall, a jazz piano, a harpsichord, an organ, etc.

7.) **Computer Interface**

The most significant innovation that electronic keyboards have given us is the ability to slave a musical keyboard to a digital driver. The pedagogical and creative advantages are so numerous it seems silly to even attempt to make a list; but these below are the most important ones to me:

- 1.) With my computer and various programs I have created a library of I-don't-know-how-many thousands of documents. These documents are used as teaching aids. They are digital vestiges of

most of the pieces that I teach; the students are instructed in how to download these documents from their e-mail, and how to practice with them so that the students rehearsal is constantly being reinforced by the exact right pitches, rhythms, and tempi.

2.) The use of notation and sequencing programs can make free sheet music available from the Internet by translating MIDI files into written hard copies. This is becoming more and more standard.

3.) The creative possibilities are simply out of this world. I have five year-old students who compose completely coherent sounding pieces the first time with a notation program. Of course the creative experience always makes the foundation of students' musicianship much much stronger. Experiencing music-making from the inside provides the motivation for years of interest and expression.

In conclusion, those of you who are unconvinced by my arguments and insist on spending money on an acoustic piano, listen to these last words of advice:

1.) Get a good one—no less than \$3,500. Preferably \$5,000.

2.) Keep it tuned—put the piano tuner's number on your calendar and call him regularly.

3.) Get an electronic keyboard anyway—so you can talk to your computer with it.

RFT

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