

GETTING STARTED PIANOS



■ It might seem an odd statement, but the piano is a relatively modern instrument. Woodwinds, drums, and strings have been part of human history for millennia, but the piano dates from the 1700s. There were earlier stringed keyboards—such as the spinet and virginal—but these were small, quiet instruments with narrow tonal ranges. The harpsichord is louder and more versatile, but its strings are plucked making a dynamic mixture of soft and loud (“piano” and “forte”) notes difficult to achieve.

Italian Bartolomeo di Francesco Cristofori developed the first “soft and loud” string keyboard, and his pianoforte began a series of innovations that continue to this day. Modern acoustic pianos include very high-quality wires that are hit with a hammer, a resonating soundboard, and pedals to dampen and sustain notes. The range of creativity and expression that these innovations offer makes the piano one of the most popular musical instruments in the world.

When shopping for a piano or keyboard, first consider the number of keys you require. Serious amateurs will get the most out of a full 88-key keyboard, but smaller varieties are available, a good idea if space and portability are an issue. Another consideration is how “weighted” the keys are. Generally speaking, the closer the “action” (or the feel) the keys are to the real thing, the more expensive the instrument. If you plan to start on a digital keyboard and work up to an acoustic, your first instrument should emulate an acoustic—size, key weight, and foot pedals.

Digital pianos and keyboards come with a dizzying array of functions, some of which are very useful for the beginner (metronomes and lighted keys) and some of which are aimed at the professional (recording “workstations” or banks of classic keyboard sounds). Find a music store with a sales staff willing to help you find the piano or keyboard that, not only fits your budget, but also your musical taste and your space and noise considerations.

TRY THIS: SIMPLE FINGER EXERCISE

“Five finger exercises” are short phrases that repeat through a scale. After ascending through a whole octave (see diagram), the pattern is reversed, descending to the starting point. For this example, your hands should be in the “full C position.” Practice the right hand first, then the left, and combine both hands when you gain confidence. Start slowly at first and use a metronome to control your rhythm as you play faster.



PORTABLE KEYBOARD

If you are serious about learning, resist the temptation to buy an inexpensive keyboard from a big box store. However, a quality digital keyboard is an option for a beginner looking to play a variety of styles. Keyboards have many sounds beyond piano, such as Hammond organ, synthesizer, and harpsichord. They are also easier to transport.



DIGITAL PIANO



With so many digital pianos on the market, you may narrow the selection by asking to look at models with features developed for the novice pianist, including built-in metronomes, play-along songs, lighted keys, and headphones.

UPRIGHT ACOUSTIC

For amateur musicians, there are many advantages to buying an upright acoustic piano. Not as expensive as a grand, their tone in a small space can be just as rich, they take up less space, and always add a touch of class to a home—not to mention the chance for an old-fashioned singalong!



GRAND PIANO

A grand piano is a true investment, much like a car or a house. Like both, you need to consider not only the initial cost but the upkeep as well. A quality grand needs to be kept within specific temperature and humidity ranges and cleaned and professionally tuned occasionally. That said, if you can afford it, this is one purchase that definitely will become an heirloom.

