

## *Acoustic, Digital, or Keyboard?*

### Choosing an Instrument

Buying an instrument provides a nurturing environment for enthusiasm, growth, and dedication. By purchasing a quality instrument, the student is involved with their weekly lessons. They gain the potential to not only understand what is taught, but to advance their ability by wanting to learn. In fact, purchasing a quality instrument is one of the best ways to motivate students. Not only can they appreciate their current level of playing, but they can appreciate the horizon of musical opportunities undiscovered.

While acoustic pianos are the ideal standard, digital pianos can be a great alternative. Most teachers agree that the best chances at success result when lessons are paired with a quality instrument for practicing.

### *Acoustic Pianos*

#### Best scenario for all levels of playing abilities

An acoustic piano has 88 keys and produces sound when felt hammers strike steel strings. The device that shapes each keystroke into an acoustic tone is called a piano's *action*. The action is the heart of the piano, being what every student strives to master and on which he or she builds pianistic technique and artistry. A piano's authentic sound and action provide ideal development for posture, technique and musical tone.

Acoustic pianos come in a variety of sizes and paint finishes as grands or uprights. Both types are suitable for all levels of playing. Quality pianos can range from \$2,000 to over \$80,000. Some piano dealers offer home rentals and many offer used pianos. Like a car, however, all acoustic pianos require scheduled maintenance by a reputable piano technician, including tuning at least once a year. When kept in optimal condition, pianos can be a financial investment, since they retain their value over time. In the end, acoustic pianos are considered the best scenario for piano study, but they do require careful thought about budget, maintenance, and noise levels.

## *Digital Pianos*

For smaller budgets, limited room and noise-sensitive locations

A digital piano also has 88 keys but produces its sound electronically. The action in a digital keyboard is carefully weighted to mimic the action of an acoustic piano, enabling students to develop their technique. For most students, the similarities between digital and acoustic pianos enable them to progress at similar rates of study.

Digital pianos come in a variety of finishes that look like their acoustic counterparts. Quality digital pianos start around \$1,000. Unlike acoustic pianos, however, digital ones require no maintenance. These pianos usually include all the necessary accessories for practicing, such as a bench, music rack, and pedals. For noise-sensitive environments, using headphones conveniently offers silent practicing. Digital pianos are available from a variety of reputable brands both in-store and online.

## *Keyboards*

With careful consideration, a good alternative to digital pianos

Keyboards have a wide range of sizes and even wider range of purposes. With varying numbers of keys and features, many are not intended for practicing piano. Inappropriate types for practicing include toys, organs, synthesizers, and keyboard controllers. In addition, keyboards under \$400 rarely have any type of weighted key and cannot function as a suitable alternative to an acoustic piano. These types of keyboards can severely limit any development of pianistic technique. They are not used by serious students and are not recommended for piano study. In fact, keyboards without a suitable action are correlated with a greater likelihood of student dropout.

However, there are higher quality keyboards suitable for piano study. The basic requirements include 88 keys and a weighted action, also called a *graded-hammer action* or *scaled-hammer action*. Generally, keyboards with these features start around \$500. Unfortunately, they do not always include all the necessary accessories for piano practice, including a bench, keyboard stand, music rack, and piano pedals. For a healthy posture and a suitable practicing environment, these equally important items should not be disregarded or substituted with household furniture. Both keyboards and accessories are available from a variety of brands in-store and online.

### *Where should I shop and buy my instrument?*

In general, professional music and audio storefronts are best suited. Authorized dealers can also be found at each brand's website. When buying used pianos from personal sellers, treat it like buying a used car and hire a reputable "mechanic," known as a *piano technician*. The technician can then accurately assess the instrument's condition, quality, and value before purchase.

Used instruments can also be bought at college piano sales, such as those held by Dickinson and Messiah Colleges, respectively. Digital pianos and keyboards can also be found at competitive rates via reputable used vendors and open-box sales at professional audio retailers. Lastly, most dealers and retailers offer competitive financing for all instruments.

*Quality Digital Brands:*           Kawai, Korg, Roland, Yamaha

*Local Piano Dealers:*           Cunningham Piano (Philadelphia)  
  Jacobs Music (Philadelphia)  
  Menchey Music (Lancaster)

*Online Retailers:*                B&H Photo Video, Kraft Music, Sweetwater