

What to look for when buying a second-hand piano

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN BUYING A SECOND-HAND PIANO

The first decision is whether you want an upright or a grand piano and often the size and cost are determining factors in this choice. In general, a larger piano with longer strings will sound better than a smaller instrument. Small pianos, both grand and upright, may suffer from weak tone due to the small soundboard area and their short strings.

Modern upright and grand instruments are overstrung which means that the bass strings run diagonally across the piano crossing over the treble strings and this arrangement gives the longest possible string length for the size of the piano. Older instruments are sometimes straightstrung which means that the strings run parallel to each other which limits the length of the longest strings.

Modern upright pianos are underdamped which means that the dampers are located beneath the hammers where they are much more effective than overdampers. There are many types of actions found in older pianos which are now considered obsolete. Many old pianos (pre 1930) were overdamped, meaning that the dampers sit against the strings above the level of the hammers. When looking in from the top in an overdamper action, the hammers are obscured from view by the wooden rail holding the dampers. This type of action is now obsolete and pianos with this type of action are old, worn out and should be avoided. [The Gallery \(/en/Gallery\)](#) has some photographs of the 'birdcage style' obsolete overdamper action. Many overdampers were also straightstrung. A good condition, straight strung overdamper piano made by one of the better piano manufacturers could be very good, however without an expert assessment, it is usually best to avoid them.

While the modern upright action is underdamped, underdamped grand actions are obsolete or only found in historical, period instruments. Overdamped upright piano actions are obsolete but all modern grands are effectively overdamped as the dampers sit on the strings.

The action of a grand piano can only be partially seen through the strings, beneath the music desk making it difficult to identify which of the several different types of action is fitted. Unqualified persons should never attempt to remove a grand action as there is danger of causing considerable damage. Some English grand pianos from the 1920s and 1930s have a spring and loop action (sometimes called a 'simplex' action) which is really no more than an upright action on its back and are best avoided. You should look for a grand with a Roller or Repetition action.

When you find an instrument that you like, we suggest that you look over the piano externally, play it and then look inside. The following points should help you decide whether an instrument is worth considering.

- Is the casework and appearance of the piano acceptable in its current condition? This is subjective and down to personal preference although it may have a bearing on the price.
- Are the keys level and evenly spaced?
- Play each note twice in quick succession. Did they all work? Playing notes twice will show if any note (or the whole piano) has suffered from damp in the past. Do this over the whole compass, white keys and black keys, from the bottom note to the top note. A note which is tight usually won't repeat a second time as the hammer won't drop back to allow it to play again as it should.
- Was the sound even across the whole keyboard? Did any notes stand out louder/softer than their neighbour?
- Did the sound stop when the key was released or did it ring on?

- Did you hear any unusual noises (buzzes, clicks, squeaks, etc.) when the keys were played?
- Do the pedals work properly and silently?

Looking inside the piano:

- Does the action look clean?
- Are the component parts neatly aligned?
- Are there any signs of damage?
- Are any strings missing, or have some been replaced? (New strings will be a different colour from the rest)
- Can you see any broken or missing parts?
- Can you see any obvious signs of moths, woodworm or mice?

The iron frame can be seen most easily in the bottom of an upright piano, although it usually covers most of the area inside the piano. The strings are attached to the frame at the bottom and to the tuning pins at the top.

- Is there any sign of rust on the frame or strings?
- Is the iron frame cracked? (Photographs of cracks in frames are in the Gallery)
- Are there cracks in the wood between the tuning pins?
- Are some tuning pins leaning down more than others?

The soundboard is the varnished wooden panel which can be seen underneath the strings. The bridges are lengths of wood, glued to the soundboard, into which metal pins are driven. The strings run over the bridges and between the pins. The vibration of the strings is transmitted to the soundboard by the bridges, and this produces the sound you hear. It is vital that these parts are in good condition.

- Are there cracks in the soundboard?
- Are there splits in the bridges between the bridge pins? (An older piano may have a wooden bridge close to the tuning pins, in addition to those on the soundboard.)
- Are there any gaps between the bridges and the soundboard? (If so the sound will be of poor quality and there may be a rattling noise as the notes are played.)

If, after checking the points listed above, you have any concerns, these should be discussed with the person selling the piano. However to reduce any risk in buying a second-hand piano we suggest that you always take a qualified Tuner or Technician with you to look over any piano you may be considering buying.

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It's a good idea to make a list when looking at pianos, noting the following general points;

- Will you like it in your house? (Case design and size considerations)
- Age of the instrument
- General condition. Look inside if you get the chance
- Overstrung or straight-strung?
- Overdamper or underdamper?
- Make (in case you wish to compare another similar one)
- Is it at pitch? Your tuner will be able to tell you this, or you could take a tuning fork with you, or download a tuning app and compare one of these notes with the fork.

If you are considering purchasing a minipiano and are looking at models by the firm Eavestaff, most are reasonable, however

we strongly recommend that you avoid the 'Eavestaff Minipiano' where the tuning pins are under the keyboard. Due to the age of these pianos, the pins are very likely to be loose. They cannot be punched in to get a better grip since they go right through the wooden wrest plank (the block which holds the tuning pins).

This means that these instruments cannot be made to stay in tune.

How often should my piano be tuned or serviced?

It is usually recommended to have your piano tuned at least twice a year. Brand new pianos and some older instruments may require to be tuned more often. The pitch of a piano will drop if a piano is not tuned on a regular basis and the stability of its environment will determine how often it needs to be tuned. All pianos need to be serviced at some point in their life, but this can depend on the amount of usage they receive and the conditions in which they are kept. A concert pianist's instrument would perhaps benefit from an annual service whereas one used by a beginner may only need to be looked over every five years or so to maintain its optimum playing condition.

Why does a piano need maintenance?

The mechanism of the piano (the action), with a large number of moving parts, becomes subject to wear and tear and requires to be regulated to keep its optimum performance and feel. Rather like a car, the piano requires ongoing attention (tuning) with occasional service and repairs. Each note needs to be regulated individually to give optimum performance. Regulation also improves the touch which over time becomes uneven due to the amount of use the piano receives. Unevenness of tone can be remedied by skilful voicing of the hammers to give a good overall balance. On musician's pianos and on concert instruments this is done on a regular basis. The pedals also require occasional adjustment.

How much should I expect to pay for piano tuning?

PTA Registered Tuners are highly skilled people who make a very difficult job look easy. Therefore you should be prepared to pay a reasonable amount for a tuner's professional ability and experience. The PTA cannot legally advise on fees, but bear in mind that the cheapest price may not always provide the best service. The time taken to tune a piano varies considerably depending upon the nature and condition of the piano and the tuner's style. A thorough and stable tuning takes skill, time and patience, and the PTA would expect one of our Members to continuously check their tuning as they work. Remember you are not just paying for the tuning time; a tuner's business has many overheads, including tools, travelling time and expenses, all which need to be covered in the fee charged.

Where is the best place to stand my piano?

A piano does not like to be too hot or too cold. As climate and environment affect a piano, avoid placing pianos where this may be an issue; avoid standing the instrument in a draught and place it away from windows, radiators or other sources of heat. A constant temperature of between 18°C to 21°C (65°F to 70°F) is ideal. Central heating systems dry the air, drawing moisture from the wooden components of the piano. When the heating is switched off at night the humidity rises, and when switched on in the morning, the humidity drops. These changes in relative humidity cause the wood in the piano to shrink and expand. Changes to relative humidity are often responsible for tuning instability and other serious problems, such as loose tuning pins, split soundboard and disruption of regulation. Ideally, you should try to keep your piano within 45 - 60 per cent relative humidity. If you feel that your piano is in an unsuitable environment you could consider buying either a humidifier to counteract excess dryness or a dehumidifier for excess dampness. Your piano tuner will be able to advise you.

How can I move my piano?

Pianos can suffer very serious damage unless they are moved in the correct way and the PTA recommends that the services of a professional piano mover are engaged to move any piano.

Grand pianos

While it is tempting to push a grand piano on a level surface, they ought to be lifted and supported as they are moved and this should not be attempted with fewer than three people. There are special A-frames available which can be fitted to instruments that need to be moved on a regular basis.

Upright pianos

An upright piano can be dangerously unbalanced and can tip over easily because its heavy iron frame places the centre of gravity very near the back. The small dress castors on many uprights are not designed for these instruments to be wheeled; they should be lifted and moved on a trolley.

What is the lifespan of a piano?

Between fifty to seventy years is an average age, however factors such as the quality of the piano, the regularity of its maintenance, how much the piano is played and the climatic conditions in which it is kept, could either extend or reduce this expectation.

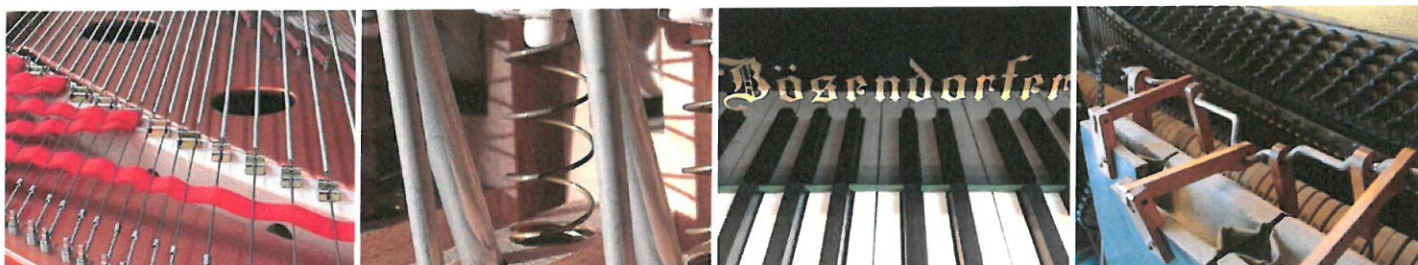
How do I care for my piano day to day?

Avoid placing drinks, vases of flowers or pot plants on your piano as spilled liquids cause serious damage, the repair of which may amount to a major overhaul.

To keep new polyester or satin lacquer finished pianos clean, wipe them with a slightly damp cloth and dry carefully — no polish is needed. Older French polished pianos need polish revive; apply with a clean soft cloth and then polish with a soft duster and on no account use spray polish.

Any marks on the keys which cannot be removed with a damp cloth should be left for the piano tuner to deal with.

Protect your piano from dust, especially during decorating or building work.



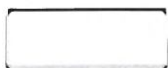
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