

PIANO BASICS

Acoustic vs. Digital Pianos

Pros and cons if you're in the market to purchase a piano!

Acoustic: The gold standard for public performance is a full-sized concert grand piano. If you already own an acoustic piano for home use, like a Grand (concert, baby, petite...) with its horizontally-stretched strings, or an Upright (full, console, spinet...) with its vertically-stretched strings, you appreciate the rich, luxurious sounds that fill the home and surround you in beautiful music.



Concert Grand



Upright



Baby Grand

Console



Digital: Digital pianos contain computer chips that record and store actual piano tones. When you press a key, the original sound plays back. Unlike older-style electric pianos or synthesizers, digital pianos sound real, not electronic. Unlike some tabletop keyboards or organs, which have lightweight keys that offer no resistance, digital pianos have “weighted” keys that simulate the feel of an acoustic piano and are velocity and touch sensitive: Press quickly and firmly for a loud sound, slowly and gently for a soft sound. Digitals typically come in baby grand or console styles.

Hybrid: Some pianos are designed and sold with both acoustic strings and digital electronics, giving owners the best of both worlds. Another option is to add a digital system to an existing acoustic piano.

Acoustic Issues

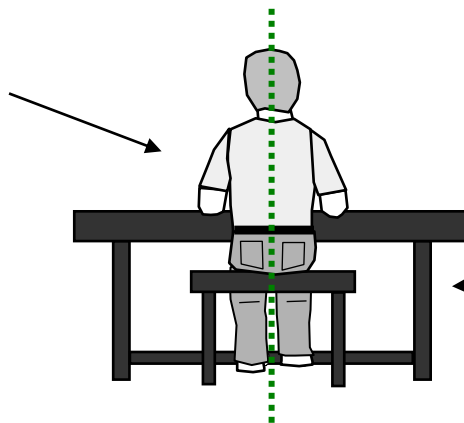
- Heavy, immobile. Require muscular acquaintances or professional movers to transport to a new location.
- Requires tuning when moved and every few months thereafter for life.
- Has only one musical voice: piano. Tonally one dimensional.
- Has no electronic features to enhance utility of the instrument.
- Dominates its surroundings with sound that may disturb others.
- Generally more expensive to purchase.

Digital Advantages

- Lightweight, portable. When disassembled, can usually fit across the back seat of a car.
- Doesn't require tuning or other types of maintenance.
- Can have many musical voices: piano, strings, brass, organ, drums, etc.
- Has electronics that can play recorded music and generate rhythms or MIDI that can control attached devices.
- Has headphones to allow play at all hours without disturbing others.
- Generally less expensive to purchase.

Sitting At The Piano

Center your body with the keyboard so you have about the same number of keys to your left and to your right.



Adjust your seat height, if possible, so your forearms are roughly level with the keyboard. If needed, buy an adjustable-height bench or stool.

Too Close!



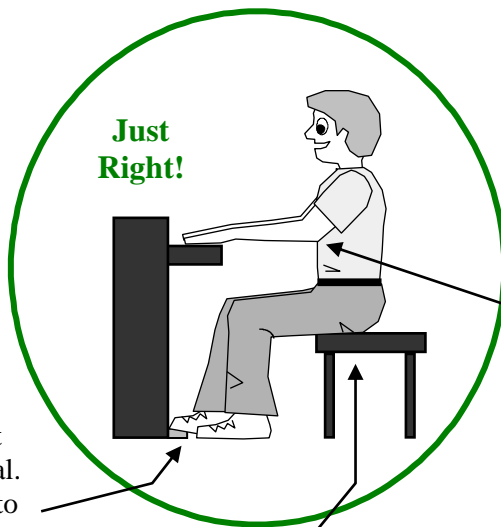
If your elbows are behind your body, move *away* from the keyboard.

Too Far!



If your elbows are straight and your arms are stretched, move *toward* the keyboard.

Just Right!



Extend your right foot so it rests gently on the *right* pedal. Press down when you want to sustain (hold) a sound.

See the Pedaling lesson for more information.

Sit somewhat forward on the bench, so that if you lift both feet you fall towards the keyboard. This will help you use the largest muscle of all when playing—your back.

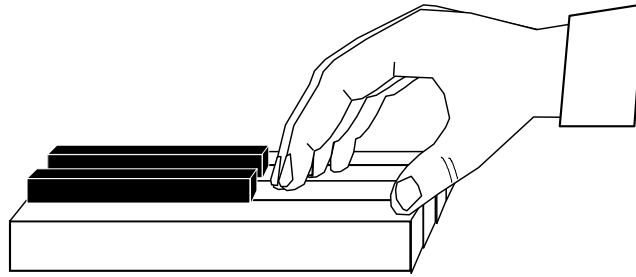
Ideally, your elbows should be a bit forward of your sides and slightly out from your body. The goal is to be able to comfortably reach all areas of the keyboard as needed.

Hands & Fingers

Fingers in Air

One of a pianist's greatest tools is gravity; the other is momentum. If you learn to keep your fingers in the air, directly over or just lightly touching the keys, you can take advantage of both. But if your fingers rest heavily on the keys, you can use neither.

On the other hand, sometimes it is useful to rest or “anchor” a finger on a key and use it as a reference for reaching out to another key that’s a known interval away.



Curl Fingers

Put your hands on your knees, then gently lift them to the keyboard, or imagine grasping a ball. You'll have more strength with curled fingers. However, you will often need to straighten them to play wider keyspans and reach up to black keys.

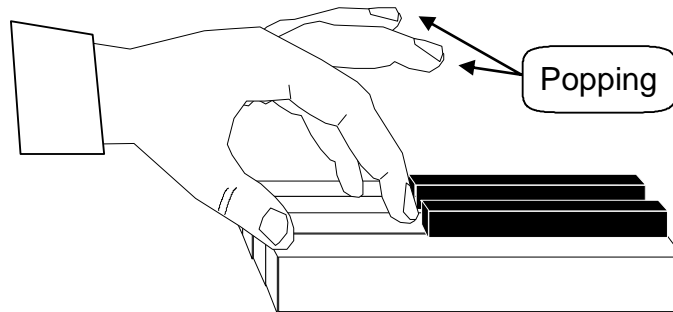
Play on Pads

Press keys with the cushions or pads of your fingers.

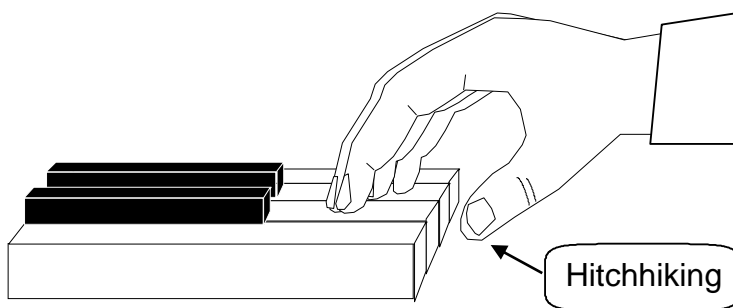
“Stand” on your thumbs rather than playing them on their sides. If you have long fingernails, you may need to trim them to avoid making clicking sounds.

Minimize Popping

As you press down one finger, the others tend to “pop” up. This is a natural reflex, like when the doctor taps under your knee with a hammer and you kick. The danger is that when fingers pop up uncontrollably, they are more likely to come down and hit the wrong key, or a crack (playing two keys instead of one). With experience, this reflex action subsides.



If you're a novice or have excessive popping, play slowly and deliberately, one finger at a time. In contrast to the previous “Fingers in Air” tip, imagine each of your fingertips has a *light coating of glue* that keeps it stuck to its key.



Avoid Hitchhiking

When you are not using your thumb, guard against letting it hang off the edge of the keyboard as if you were hitchhiking. If you do, it will be harder to get it back into position when it's needed.

Exceptions to the Rules!

If you watch pianists in concerts or online, you'll find exceptions to nearly every suggestion on these pages, from sitting at the piano to hand positions. For example, the famous pianist Vladimir Horowitz sat quite close the piano and played with straight fingers. The goal is to be comfortable while making beautiful music. With time, you'll find what works best for you!