

So You Want To Play The Piano?

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Chapter 2: Will I need a piano?

'It is never right to play ragtime fast.'
Scott Joplin (1867–1917)

The answer to this question is a resounding 'yes'. It's not possible to learn to play any instrument without regular access to it. This doesn't necessarily mean you need to buy one – you may decide to rent or borrow a piano – but there will be no progress in your piano playing until you can practise regularly. It is best not to make the mistake of turning up to your first piano lesson without having a piano on which to practise.

This chapter will hopefully provide useful tips, ideas and knowledge to help your search for the ideal instrument. First of all, you need to decide whether you want to rent or buy.

Consider options such as renting to keep costs down. Renting (or hiring) is a very good idea as this will give you or your child the chance to see if the piano is really the right instrument and whether lessons are to be continued. Renting could save you a lot of money in the long run. There are many reasonable options for renting and you will normally have a six-month or yearly contract.

You have several choices when buying or renting a piano:

- ♪ The traditional grand piano starts from a five-foot baby grand and goes up to a full nine-foot concert grand (some pianos are even larger).
- ♪ The upright piano, sometimes known as a parlour piano, is generally much smaller, therefore more suitable if you only have a small space in your home.
- ♪ The electronic or digital keyboard is a very popular choice today. Digital pianos usually have a full-size keyboard which is weighted so it feels similar to that of an acoustic or traditional piano (this means that when you play it, the keys feel akin to the weight of the keys of a concert grand) and they come complete with pedals. These instruments don't need to be tuned (a conventional piano will require periodic tuning) and can be played with headphones too.
- ♪ If neighbours are an issue, a 'silent' piano may just be for you. Many manufacturers offer a 'silent' piano option on some of their acoustic or traditional instruments; these include Yamaha, Schimmel, Seiler and Kawai. The silent system can also be installed on many other piano brands. The main feature of the 'silent' piano is an option to silence the strings courtesy of an interposing hammer bar. Sensors then pick up the piano key movement and convert it into a MIDI signal, linking it to a sound module, making it possible to play through headphones, disturbing no one.

How does a piano work?

The piano (or pianoforte as it's sometimes known) was invented at the beginning of the eighteenth century by Bartolomeo Cristofori, a Florentine harpsichord maker. The harpsichord was the piano's predecessor. The upright version appeared around 1800 and the cast iron frame was first introduced in 1825; up until this point the frames had been made of wood.

The mechanism is fairly simple. It consists of an iron frame, case, action, strings, wrest-plank, sound-board, bridges, pedals

Chapter 4:

What qualities should I look for in a piano teacher?

'There's nothing remarkable about it.

All one has to do is hit the right keys at the right time and the instrument plays itself.'

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 - 1750)

Many years ago, I received a phone call from a man who wanted to have some lessons with me. The man turned up for his lesson and was approximately Grade 5 standard, which is about the level required to play fairly simple (or intermediate level) piano pieces. He wanted to improve his playing considerably and was hoping to take Grade 8 one day (this is the final grade in most music examination boards' series of amateur graded exams in the UK).

This man then dropped the bombshell which was to change my perception of piano teaching forever.

Apparently he was ALREADY a piano teacher. It transpired that he had been teaching the piano for over ten years and had around 40 students who came to him for lessons every week. He had no qualifications at all and was unable to play a piece through without making many basic errors. Grade 5 piano is not a teaching qualification and nor is Grade 8. They are both amateur exams and a professional musician or teacher should ideally have a teaching or performing diploma from a bona fide music conservatoire.

There are **NO** rules or regulations in the UK to stop anyone setting up as a piano teacher. Many so-called teachers have little experience of piano teaching and will assume you won't notice their incompetence.

Schools and music services do set their own standards when employing peripatetic music teachers and they generally select well trained, qualified tutors, but in the world of private practice these standards are non-existent. It's difficult to know where to lay the blame here (and it is not my place to do so), so I will just say that you must be very vigilant when it comes to choosing a teacher. There are many piano teachers who are very experienced and qualified, and who do wonderful work. It is up to you to find them. Hopefully this chapter will provide some guidance.

The pupil I mentioned at the beginning only had a few lessons with me, and still has no advanced performing or teaching qualifications. Despite all this, he is very much alive and kicking as a piano teacher in the south-east of England, advertising widely on the internet and through his own professional website which specifically trumpets many years of teaching experience. There are countless instrumental teachers who match this man's profile and unfortunately it is a recurring story throughout the UK.

My point in this example is that 20 years of teaching experience will not necessarily compensate for lack of ability or qualifications.

Piano teachers, unlike some teaching or coaching professions, require a combination of teaching ability and technical expertise. To teach the piano, you need to be able to correctly demonstrate technique and to be able to play and perform at a much higher level than your students are expected to achieve.

There are many teachers who will advertise themselves as only able or willing to teach beginners up to intermediate level. This is generally a warning light, as it usually infers they are not highly trained and should therefore be avoided.