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Foreword

Pianos are complicated instruments. Some have deep, dark secrets, some have sunny dispositions, some have no secrets at all. There are pianos with a grey, metallic “European” sound; some with a stringier but brilliant “American” sound; some with a laser-sharp, “straight” “Japanese” sound. There are pianos with a wealth of overtones, and some with very few; some thick-sounding instruments, some thin and weak but interesting. But if a dozen people were asked to draw pianos, they would almost all look the same.

There have been some extraordinary shapes of pianos in the past (square, left-handed, “giraffe”), but the important thing about a piano is what’s inside the case. If we drew a portrait of a piano, we would have to deal with its moods, not just its clothes. So, obviously, the piano is not its case. But is this really so obvious? Certainly not to the people (too numerous to conceal themselves) who have their piano in a sun-burnt area of their house with the top perpetually open (in case unexpected guests arrive? or so they can feel “artistic”?). To them a piano has to look the part, not demand proper treatment. These people don’t need a piano, they just need something that looks like one.

I grew up with pianos; I’ve literally spent my life with them. I don’t remember ever thinking, “Oh, this is a neat-looking piano. I bet it’s really good.” If I played it and it told me something, it was an interesting instrument. If I played it and it said little (although it might be noisy), I hoped I would never have to meet it under more crucial circumstances. In fact (and this is fortunate) there is no perfect piano. How good a piano is depends on what its use is to be. It could be the “perfect” piano for playing Debussy and a disaster for Stravinsky. But I think the best pianos can handle both with great success. Out of the hundreds or thousands of instruments I’ve played, I can recall perhaps five or six that could play almost any music equally well under a large variety of circumstances (different halls, for example).

I personally feel the piano to be far in advance of any of the more recent keyboard instruments in that it still demands that you use your whole body and all your muscles, whereas everything since has been

denying that need. Artificially adding piano-like touch control to a synthesizer is about as much of an improvement as electrifying a pepper mill. So what?

The piano was a historic achievement in that it both incorporated the true innovations before it and answered the artists’ need to be more involved, *not* to get more done with less effort. The “artistic need” that has generated instruments since the piano, on the other hand, is the need to find something that could be successfully played at Yankee Stadium or played by typists on a lunch break. One is a media need (although “need” isn’t the right word); the other is the desire to be creative in one’s “spare time.” To me, leisure and creativity are as far apart as the *Reader’s Digest* and the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Piano music is a kind of medium between our “progressive” age and the feelings that existed before this age. The piano may be relatively sophisticated, but it is by no means always civilized. In my opinion, a good piano can produce more variations in tone color than any other acoustic keyboard instrument, and more than *any* keyboard instrument can without flipping a switch or turning a knob.

When I consider, now, what I know about pianos, it’s still not very much, but probably much more than most professional pianists. Since most pianists don’t carry their instrument with them, they tend to let piano technicians take care of the instruments they encounter. By contrast, a clarinet player doesn’t have a clarinet tuner backstage in case something goes wrong. After a while, ignorance becomes apathy. So pianos begin to get the reputation of being these amazingly stable pieces of furniture with strings and some mysterious workings inside that just last and last and are good investments and are always ready just in case some talented friend comes over to tickle the ivories.

It’s all a bit more serious (and quite a bit more intriguing) than that. Pianos respond to care with amazing lifelikeness. I used to have to have my piano tuned several times a month if I was working on something, but after I decided to control the humidity and temperature year-round, magically, the piano didn’t really need tuning more than twice or three times a

year. In contrast, I played a beautiful German Steinway in San Francisco, and after it spent a few months as a rental in Jamaica, it came back a disaster. Oh, it *looked* the same, but when my technician asked me to play it and tell him what I thought, I not only didn't recognize anything about its sound, but immediately knew it was a terrible instrument. Only a few months before, it had been one of the pianos I might have purchased at almost any price. So pianos can die as suddenly as humans.

Speaking of technicians, there is a commonly held belief that, just as all pianos are shaped the same and go "bong . . . bong," all technicians are the same. Please do not make this mistake! Find the one good local technician you *might* have in your area, and if there isn't one, don't be afraid to spend a little more to get one from farther away. I once had a "legendary" technician (the few legendary technicians I've met should have stayed legends) come out to find a mysterious little buzzing noise in the second D above middle C. He came out month after month looking for that little devil. He even brought a second legend with him and they crawled around on the floor, inspected the windows for rattles, voiced (tone-regulated) and re-voiced the instrument until I'm sure it felt eighty years old in some places; but they did not remove the buzz. About six months later, I decided to ask my traveling technician to come down from Boston and check out this sound. He came, had dinner, went upstairs, and it took him about three minutes to adjust the string around its pin and eliminate the buzz . . . forever!

A young technician who used to work for me was very excited to be hired to tune the piano at a music festival in the Northeast. Just before a favorite pianist of his was to go on stage, the technician walked on to check the piano, which, he knew, was badly in need of tuning. The pianist asked him what he was doing, and the technician explained that he heard how badly the piano was holding pitch and that he was going out to tune it. But the pianist said, "No, it's okay. It doesn't matter." I think perhaps one could take this attitude to its logical conclusion by saying that, then, the music doesn't matter either.

I have been in countless situations where I've asserted myself regarding the poor condition of an instrument and it's been considered bad mannered. "But, Monsieur Jarrett, Mr. _____ and Mr. _____ played on this piano only a matter of months ago." (Months! A piano doesn't need more than a matter of days to be destroyed.) Or: "Mr. Jarrett, so-and-so played on this piano last week and he didn't complain." Or: "Oh, Mr. Jarrett, everyone complains about this piano. . . . I don't know what to do." "Have it voiced," I said to one club owner. "Really. What is voicing?" "Something not enough

pianists know anything about." (The club owner said okay, not a word he used often.) In fact, numerous pianists had been playing on his instrument and complaining, but offering no insight as to whether there was anything that could be done. "These artists, they're so moody and temperamental." Well, pianos can get that way too, and we have to work together.

Actually, I have gotten a reputation for being a prima donna or a perfectionist based on only one thing: I know what I need to make the music I will be making. If I don't know this, only the music can suffer. If the music suffers, then what am I doing here halfway around the world from home? Jet lag doesn't help either, so why have more things wrong than just the unpredictable?

I could tell a lot more stories about my piano experiences, but what I'm getting at is this: We are not well enough informed about the nature of the piano to either know what we are missing or appreciate what we have. We can complain or we can hope for a chance love affair, but if we don't *know* something about our own instrument, our limits are the limits of our luck.

This certainly applies to purchasing a piano as well, and Larry Fine's book will make it harder to ignore many things about the piano that can either contribute to a successful purchase or lead to a rip-off. Don't think someone else will make the right choice for you. Not even pianists can choose pianos for other pianists. Attempts to do so have failed many times. Of course, if you end up after all this with an instrument you love or an instrument that satisfactorily fills your needs, you may not have to ever go piano shopping again. Pianos can easily outlive people.

As good as this book is, it has its limits. It cannot tell you how to hear or what sound to like (though it can tell you some things to listen for). It can't be responsible for the care of your instrument (but it provides lots of pointers). And it can't help you at all if you want a piano just to put a silk throw over it and some antique vases on it. But you already know that, or you probably would have spent your money on *The Silk-Throw Book* instead. (I wouldn't be surprised if that book has a chapter about just which pianos look better under the silk!)

So we're back in the solarium with a sunburnt, cracking finish on the wood (although this part faces the wall and the heat ducts, of course but *not* incoming guests), a soundboard that, every sunny morning, knows the real meaning of stress, not to mention a cast-iron frame that could fry an egg once a day. I have absolutely no tolerance for humans behaving in this way toward pianos because, as I said before, I've lived with pianos all my life and have learned to respect

their needs. To me, they are often much more alive than the people I see every day.

However, for those of you who are truly interested in buying a piano to make music on it (or in learning about the piano you already have), *The Piano Book* is

the most comprehensive and helpful guide to the mysteries of the piano, and how to buy one, yet published. It ought to be on your bookshelf.

KEITH JARRETT