



Caring For Your Piano

A piano is arguably the third or fourth largest expenditure most families will ever make. So you want to do everything possible to protect your investment. With good care, a piano can easily last for many generations.

Placement in your home

With a new piano coming into the home, you will need to determine where to put the instrument and it is a bigger decision than you might imagine. Your piano is made of various wood species, woods, leathers and felts, which are all sensitive to changes in humidity and, to a lesser extent, temperature. As such, it should ideally be positioned somewhere that is environmentally stable. Locate the piano away from direct sunlight, drafts and heat sources. Obviously, next to the fire place, wood-burning stove or patio doors are not good places.

If you have the flexibility in your home, the piano should ideally be placed in a room where someone practicing won't be competing with other distractions (like the TV or noise from the kitchen). Especially if you have children learning to play, you will want to make sure that you have removed all barriers and excuses for not practicing.

Realistically, floor plans and existing furniture may limit where your piano is placed. It is okay to make tradeoffs as long as you remember that your piano will stay in tune longer if it is environmentally stable.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, we are blessed with a climate that is relatively mild and uniform year-round. As such, we don't normally see the extremes of temperature or humidity that other parts of the world can experience, or even the seasonal swings that can occur. So in most all cases, additional environmental controls are not needed. Systems to control temperature and humidity can be installed by your technician if this not the case for you. Jars of water, light bulbs, or other "home remedies" have no such control and can actually do more harm than good.

Finally, recognize that details of the room will affect the sound acoustics. Furniture, flooring (hardwood vs. carpet), drapes and even the walls (plaster vs. heavy fabric wallpaper) will affect the sound and tone from your piano. So a very "bright" room (hard floors and walls, lots of windows, no drapes and little

furniture) will nicely "bring up" an older mellow piano whereas a new, high-tension piano might sound very harsh.

Finish, keys and brass care

Most new pianos will come with instructions for how to care for the finish. Certainly the first rule is: Follow the piano manufacturer's recommendations. But otherwise, the following can be used as general care guidelines.

When it comes to trying out a new polish or rub, the second rule would be: Test on a non-obvious area of the cabinet. You always want to try things on a small section where the results won't stand out if you are unhappy with the outcome.

Piano finishes come in three basic types:

1. Open Pore Wood Grain. This finish looks the most like traditional furniture (think "early American") and will usually be medium-gloss with a noticeable wood grain. Use your regular furniture polish or wax to clean and dust. (For *very old* pianos, Murphy Soap Oil is effective in cleaning up the cabinet. Always try this on test area first.)
2. Lacquer Finish. Usually black with a satin to high-gloss finish. Because the finish is so uniform, it can be hard to clean without causing streaks. Use a furniture cream or Cory Care product specifically made for this finish along with a very soft cloth.
3. Polyester. These are the very high-gloss finishes that have recently become so popular. The difficulty is that it is possible over time to build up micro-scratches in the surface (think of the plastic lenses in your eyeglasses). A very soft, slightly damp cloth should be all that you need.

Keys (both naturals and sharps) may be cleaned with a soft, damp cloth. Brass pedals can be cleaned up with generic brass polish (though these frequently have a clear lacquer coating and should not need any treatment for many years).

Two caveats for the keys on older pianos. Ivory keys can curl and detach if they get wet, so avoid a cleaning cloth that is too damp. Also, beware that the sharps may be painted or stained black, which can

run and streak if they get too damp. Another note regarding ivory keytops – they will look their best over time if the fallboard is left *open*. Exposure to light helps even out the coloring and minimize yellowing.

(Caution – do NOT attempt to reglue old ivories yourself. Ivory is much more flexible and porous than you might realize and reattaching should be left to a qualified piano technician.)

The under-lid area of grands can be vacuumed with a soft brush attachment. Just stay clear of the damper heads (the black hump-shaped pieces over most of the strings that rise when you push the sustain pedal). Your piano technician should have tools for cleaning the soundboard if it gets too dusty. Uprights may also be vacuumed by removing either the music desk or knee board.

Regular tuning

The strongest advice all piano technicians will give is, “keep your piano in tune”. Reasons for this are multiple:

- It’s what your piano was designed for and will produce the optimal sound.
- Especially important if you have children in the household. With their developing ears, they will only learn the different pitches correctly if in fact they are consistently right.
- If you play with other musicians or you make any recordings of the piano.
- No one enjoys playing a piano that is out of tune. Although this is readily apparent on pianos that are grossly off, it’s even true on pianos that may be only slightly out of tune. You may not even be aware that the piano needs tuning, only that things don’t sound “right”.

New pianos are a special case; their pitch drops quickly for the first few years as the new strings stretch and wood parts settle. It’s very important that a new piano be maintained at proper pitch (A-440) during this period, so the string tension and piano structure can reach stable equilibrium. Most manufacturers recommend three to four tunings the first year, and at least two annually after that.

Aside from this initial settling, seasonal change is the primary reason pianos go out of tune (though heavy playing is a close second). To understand why, you must realize that the piano’s main acoustical structure, the soundboard, is made of wood (typically 3/8-inch thick Sitka spruce). And while the wooden soundboards produce a wonderful sound, they also

react constantly to weather. As humidity goes up, a soundboard swells, increasing its crowned shape and stretching the piano’s strings to a higher pitch. During dry times, the soundboard flattens out, lowering tension on the strings and causing the pitch to drop.

Unfortunately, the strings don’t change pitch equally. Those near the soundboard’s edge move the least, and those near the center move the most.

The degree to which a piano gets played also affects the stability of the tuning. Those with heavy playing will go out of tune more quickly.

When a technician tunes your piano, there is much more going on than meets the eye. Using what’s referred to as “hammer technique”, a lot of the technician’s effort goes into assuring that all the tensions in the different wire segments are in balance once the string is in tune. Otherwise, one good fortissimo playing of a key and the string can slide past a bearing point, changing its pitch. (This is why technicians strike the keys so hard when tuning – to make sure the tensions come into balance during the tuning, and not later when you are playing.)

Experienced piano technicians can usually tune pianos under a wide range of conditions. But even those with electronic tuning devices use their listening abilities a great deal and the quality of any tuning will suffer in a noisy environment. Do yourself and your technician a favor by providing for a quiet setting during the tuning appointment.

Tuning a piano can best be thought of as an iterative process – you keep getting closer to perfection with each pass through the tuning process, but you never quite get there. A piano technician’s work is never done. Even a freshly tuned piano can always be slightly improved on.

If your piano is well maintained (tuned at least twice a year) then it should be possible to do a good job tuning the piano with a single pass. However if it’s been a few years, then the piano is likely more than 10 to 20 cents off, and two or more passes will be needed (a service referred to as a “pitch raise”).

(Portions of this article were drawn (with permission) from “Info Bites About Pianos” published by the Piano Technicians Guild.)

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