



## Premium Piano Shopping

*by Rob Mitchell*

One of the piano dealers I work for frequently does "Road Shows" in a local discount club store. As I'm usually asked to tune these pianos before hand, I often get to spend some time with sales people before the doors open. One salesman in particular commented that he always approaches pricing for customers who are not normally familiar with pianos with a bit of caution. In discussing the price, it's not uncommon to get sort of a "wow" reaction. Usually this is surprise at how much pianos cost, but sometimes it's surprise at how little they cost.

This article discusses why one particular piano costs more than another and the factors that distinguish premium pianos. It wraps up with some buying tips for any piano shopper.

### Piano Materials

The selection of materials used in pianos can vary widely between manufacturers and is a point of great pride for some ("Our soundboards are made from the highest quality, close-grained Sitka spruce that is kiln dried for one year before use"). Many of the material choices will affect both the quality of sound produced as well as the long-term mechanical reliability of the instrument.

As with other industries, the trend in the piano world is for manufacturers to outsource an increasing percentage of their components. So while at one time it was common for a manufacturer to do everything from casting the plate to winding the strings to making the hammers, this is increasingly rare today (and not necessarily a bad thing).

In terms of the sound produced, the hammers, strings (especially the wound bass strings), bridges and soundboard have the greatest influence. The hammers themselves are made from a high quality compressed felt. Obviously the soundboard and bridge assembly are very important to the piano's sound. Soundboards have historically been made from a high quality spruce. In the area of piano materials, you generally get what you pay for: higher quality materials generally cost more.

One emerging technology for soundboards is the use of composite materials instead of wood. These have not yet been widely accepted and currently show up mostly in lower cost pianos. Although they generally

sound okay when new, the jury is still out on the long-term performance of these boards.

Historically, the piano action (the mechanical assembly that translates the depressed key into a moving hammer) has been made of wood. Another emerging technology is the use of molded plastic or carbon fiber to replace some or all of these parts. Since these are also relatively new (in use for the last 10-20 years), it's difficult to know how they will hold up over the entire life of the piano.

As with many other products, using the best materials has a big impact on the final results. The finest piano makers generally use the best materials they can find.

### Assembly Labor

Although individual subassemblies are increasing made by machine, most piano manufacturers still put the piano together "by hand". This means that most of the assembly steps are labor-intensive, frequently using highly skilled assembly workers or line technicians. With considerable emphasis on either training or well documented work processes, the manufacturers of today's modern piano generally produce a solid, reliable product.

Perhaps more importantly is the range of activities that happen to a piano after it has been built. A low-cost manufacturer will perform the minimal tasks to roughly tune the piano and regulate it to "boilerplate" specifications (that is, specs that they know every piano will work under). A higher quality manufacturer and dealer will put considerably more time into finely regulating the specific instrument as well as filing and voicing the hammers for superior tone.

### Support Costs

Be sure to ask about your piano's warranty. A "Ten Year Parts and Labor" warranty is common as are one or two complementary tunings. Also ask whether the warranty is transferrable to a new owner if you should sell the instrument. Finally, be aware that the warranty does not usually cover routine maintenance. It's not uncommon for piano technicians to get a call saying, "my piano doesn't work" only to find that all it needs is adjusting (regulation). Although this is generally easy to fix, it is usually at the customer's expense even if the piano is still under warranty.

### **Name Plate**

Not surprisingly, you pay extra for a premier brand name on a piano. In theory, the buyer is getting the historical quality, reliability and sound of that instrument. Almost all the major makers now offer multiple tiers of piano brands and pricing (just as the major auto companies have done for many years). In some cases, the difference between the premium and entry-level branded pianos is small. For example, Yamaha builds and sells the Cable Nelson as their entry-level piano. Though there are a few differences, the Cable Nelson is remarkably similar to the basic Yamaha piano, at a lower price.

### **Other Factors**

The piano's size (either height for an upright or length for a grand) will obviously affect the price. Larger pianos use more materials to build, take somewhat longer to build and are more expensive to ship. Your piano's size should be driven both by your budget and by the size of the room it will sit in.

On premium grands (and some uprights) the middle pedal will be a sostenuto pedal as opposed to a "bass sustain" and is generally preferable. Also, the "soft close" fallboards are becoming increasingly common across all piano grades.

Most pianos have different pricing for the cabinet finishes, cabinet details (such as art cases) and benches. I suspect that the pricing of finishes has more to do with production volumes than the actual costs. So that generally, the most popular finishes tend to be the least expensive. In choosing a finish, remember that the piano is likely to last for several generations and that today's "in" finish may not be so popular in forty years.

Several of the major piano makers offer "player" systems as an option. These are a far cry from the pneumatic piano rolls that our grandparents grew up with and are able to mechanically reproduce a wide range of highly nuanced playing. They range from ones as simple as "silent mode" (playing the piano silently so that only the pianist hears it in headphones) to fully capable record / playback / synthesizer systems. But these can be pricey, easily adding 25 to 50% to the piano's cost.

### **Making the Choice**

Obviously, if you play piano, it's easy to perform your favorite sonatas on different pianos until you find one you love (and you really should not buy a piano until you find one you LOVE). But a surprising number of people buy pianos that cannot

yet play or are buying it for the kids to learn. So here are a few things to listen for:

- Starting around ten notes up from the lowest note play each successive note down into the bass. At some point there will probably be a transition between a distinctive pitch-tone and just a crashing, rumbling sound. On the biggest and best grands, even the very lowest notes will have wonderful sound.
- Do the same in the high treble. Go all the way up to the top and discover where the transition occurs from a distinct tone to just a "plink".
- Play a note in the fifth octave, say the 5th F up from the bottom. Give it a fairly good hit and hold it down to see how long the note rings. Notes on a top piano in this range will sustain for 5 to 10 seconds, or longer.
- Open the lid to see where the "breaks" are. The most pronounced is the bass break and is marked by the change in diagonal string direction (it's the separation between the bass and treble bridges). There are also usually either one or two struts in the treble that count as breaks. Finally, note where the transition from wound to solid strings occurs. Slowly play single notes in succession through each of these breaks. On the finest pianos, you won't hear any change in tone or volume. However in lower grade pianos, the transition can be quite jarring.
- Play successive octaves with each hand as loudly and then as softly as you can. This will give you a feel for the dynamic range of the piano. There should be no strange overtones, buzzes or other unexpected sounds.
- On any given note, play it repeatedly as fast as you possibly can by alternating between your two index fingers. Grand pianos will almost always play faster than uprights as will higher quality instruments.
- Check the overall touch using this technician's trick. Place each index finger on the end of the key. Very slowly press down and feel for the aftertouch: the little "click" towards the bottom of the keystroke. (The note probably will not even sound.) Repeat a few times and move on the next key. Try this on all the keys, looking for a consistent feel across the entire keyboard.

Be sure to find out whether the specific piano you try out will be the one delivered (versus one from the warehouse). Hopefully these tips will give you and your piano salesman some discussion points, and ways to test the piano yourself. For more information or to request an appointment, visit [www.mitchellpianoservice.com](http://www.mitchellpianoservice.com).