

HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR PIANO An Article by DT David Thomas

*T*he Piano is a most beautiful musical instrument, a pinnacle of mans creative artistic abilities, capable of responding to the most subtle emotional nuances of the concert artist and enduring the steady attentions of the many students in the musical craft throughout the world – and that for many years!

Look after your piano and you will enjoy many years of **trouble free service** that will enhance your life.

If you have recently purchased a piano you will just be beginning to appreciate the exquisite beauty and joy of owning this spectacular instrument.

*The Piano instrument itself
having been in manufacture
for over 300 years... it is
essential to get good advise
that can be trusted*

There are three major elements of Piano Care to consider:-

- firstly, the **ACTION**, the maintenance of the interior componentry of the piano mechanism to give optimum performance;
- then the **APPEARANCE**, the furniture aspect of the instrument, it's finish, like a colourful 'outer Giftbox' package that the real piano comes inside of, and;
- finally the **AREA** that the instrument is kept in, the exterior surroundings and environmental aspects that have influence on the instrument.

Set out with a **DO's** and **DON'T** list, the following can assist you to keep your piano at the top of it's playing condition! ...

THE ACTION

The piano is a finely adjusted mechanism that remains conceptually largely unchanged for 300 years since Christofori invented the revolutionary design of hammer escapement action. The acoustic piano is still a manual mechanism that requires the help of human touch, timing and creativity, and the influence of natural gravity unlike many modern devices that have become electronic and digital. There are many sources of information available in books and online that describe the improvements in design and modern materials different manufacturers have made over the centuries.

A Piano Technicians job is divided into three categories: Tuning, Voicing, and Regulation.

Tuning - Most people will assume that a 'piano tuner' simply adjusts the pitch in a 'uniform' and exact manner. This would only produce a dry and bland tone. In actual fact '12 Tone Equal Temperament' tuning is a fine art of precise manipulation of the varying pitch frequencies (if you listen carefully you can hear the 'beating' oscillations of different pitches) over multiple strings (normally between 1 and 3) by a technician with a hammer tool that requires many years of study to gain the necessary accreditation. This includes hearing the harmonic subtle overtones across a strings length, even after the bridges!

Voicing - is the adjustment of the hammer felts density and assembly, that strike the strings, by techniques including pricking to gain a desired quality and even consistency of tone.

Regulation - is adjusting or sometimes repairing the components that make up the piano mechanism to work at the most efficient levels for best performance including springs, wood and carbon fibre materials and their unique properties.

YES – DO employ the services of a fully qualified Piano Technician at least once per year (after initial installation tunings) when for home use. More regular tunings will be needed for heavy dedicated use. Concert pianos will be tuned for every performance.

NO – DO NOT attempt to tune a piano yourself with DIY tools such as pliers which may lead to irrevocable damage to the tuning pins and incompetent tuning stability. Pianos that have been neglected for several years may require complete pitch-raising and more than normal additional tuning work in order to settle the instrument back to concert pitch (A440hz).

NO – You DO NOT have to tune a good piano immediately after moving, unless it is clearly underserviced or had a bumpy transit. Contrary to popular belief good pianos are mechanically stable when moved professionally and can be given time to settle in a new environment first before retuning. It is the changes in humidity that affect tuning stability the most. New Pianos will need tuning as a matter of course in the proper preparation of the instrument and are very often pre-tuned in the salesroom when sold from display.

DID YOU KNOW? - A pianos tuning pins do not act like screws which burrow into timber – A pianos tuning pins have a continuous circular thread that relies on the tightness of around 17 cross-layered pinblock ply panels to keep the pin in place, but not preventing turning. Plus collectively the strings at tension are pulling at a total 20,000lbs of pressure every day for the life of the instrument!

THE APPEARANCE

Pianos of course are an extremely attractive instrument and many buying choices (whether good or bad) are made with the 'looks' being a major part in the mind of the new purchaser. Especially that beautifully aesthetic Grand Piano design! I often say that the outer casing is really the fancy packaging that you are taking home the real piano inside, in. So too it must be treated with great care to maintain optimum value of investment.

Piano finishes and their care are dependent on the materials used, including ...

Varnish and French polishing on wood – these pianos mainly are among the older specimens up to the mid 1900s and when treated poorly can show gouges and scrapes that the modern 'mirror' finishes are more resilient to. The services of tradesmen such as furniture makers (not very easy to find) are better utilized in these cases and prevention is the best protection.

Polyester, Glass-like finishes – whether the foundation material is wood panels or modern composites, these piano finishes offer more protection to bumps, and scratches that can be 'cut' from the surface.

YES – DO employ the services of a qualified tradesmen to refinish a piano. Some of the pianos outer panels can be removed for individual repolishing (without the expense of moving the instrument).

YES – DO use a soft lint, muslin or damp cloth to remove grime and dust and not a naked hand. Never put cardboard boxes on the piano which can scratch like sandpaper! Gentle blowing 'Huffing' on the piano can provide sufficient moisture to lift stubborn smudges with a gentle cloth wipe as it evaporates.

YES – DO use a vacuum cleaner to remove heavy dust from the piano and general environment rather than a 'feather' duster which only spreads the dust around to resettle again! Put down the piano lid to cover the keys or place the felt material key cover on the keys when not in use to prevent dust from penetrating through the gaps between the key.

NO – DO NOT use furniture polishes that leave a coating on the instrument. Nor abrasive cleaners especially any with silicone content. The purpose of cleaning is to remove grease and smearing finishes back to a clean showroom 'glassy' finish. That is 'take gunk off, NOT put gunk on!'

NO – DO NOT discourage young children from playing the piano with enthusiasm as if damage will occur! The piano is very robust to heavy hands! However do teach respect and proper technique. Note that the fascination of a glissando (including adults) may lead to scratching on the key surfaces if done uncaringly. Pianos frequently have 'soft fall' lids to prevent children harming themselves.

NO – DO NOT place anything on the piano that may cause damage such as scratching to the surface or even interior in the case of water or other liquid spills. This includes pot plants and floral arrangements, metal photo frames and ring bound books. The piano is not a leaning device for social gatherings, a rest for car keys especially or a handy table for a glass of wine. Even items of jewelry and clothing and belt buckles can damage the surface. Once something is spilt into a

piano the damage can be lasting and the stains in the case of liquor, permanent. However if unavoidable, the simple precaution of a quiet word, and a soft absorbent placemat or bar mat, and a closed lid will prevent most damage occurring.

Metronomes and training or recording devices generally have rubber feet which should not scratch.

DID YOU KNOW? – A new Piano off the showroom floor is often regarded by some purchasers in this modern age as inferior or somehow ‘used’ compared to delivering a piano brand new out of the box. This is especially true of those whom think of a piano like an appliance or media device with planned obsolescence. Chances are a showroom piano has had more tunings and preparation and attention to detail to stabilize and show the piano at it’s performance best than any piano straight from the box as marvelous as many do arrive from overseas.

*A Piano is a great investment in
education, culture and value!*



THE AREA

Where and how a Piano is placed and positioned, and the conditions of it's environment can greatly affect the performance of the instrument. Care must be taken to consider this for the greatest durability of the instrument. Living by the beach or a particularly sunny or damp location are going to influence your decisions for the piano's placement.

Also the sounding tone of a piano that is so meticulously evaluated in the selection process in the Piano showroom is often going to vary greatly once the instrument is placed in it's new home environment! Different shapes and spaces with reflective surfaces and walls, and materials from curtaining, glass windows and blinds, wood paneling, and flooring consisting of woods, carpet, feature rugs, ceramics and so on greatly affect tone and 'perceived' sound!

YES – DO employ the Piano moving professionals to shift your piano. Pianos are heavy and because of this injury to person, property and piano is a real risk. The Piano can be damaged just through incorrect handling under the pianos own weight. The cost of a professional move is worth saving the potential hassle and additional expense.

NO – DO NOT attempt to move a Piano with inexperienced people with incorrect equipment at your own risk. Professionals use industrial strength trolleys and purpose- built slides, plus proper furniture grade rugs to prevent weather and dust hazards.

YES –DO position your piano on an inside wall (an outer wall in modern houses that feature internal temperature and moisture control are suitable) and out from the wall if possible. This allows the piano not only to 'breathe' (aerate) but also to let the tone disperse from the soundboard.

NO – DO NOT place the Piano where it might encounter heavy people traffic and possible 'bumps and bruises' such as a narrow hallway and should not be in situations of heavy draft. In particular where sea air is concerned a piano should be kept right away from salty air (or in an extremely well controlled air conditioned environment) which will rust and age the piano prematurely. In the case of sunward windows, harsh sun will cause fading and temperature fluctuation, so the windows should be curtained and better still have a protective tint coating.

YES – Placing the piano on castor cups will save slight movement and scratching especially on polished wooden floors or indentation on carpet. Some people will actually place a piano on a wood platform base as in a studio, to allow the greatest tone (especially a Grand Piano) emanate. Many new pianos come with the castor cups and a key cover and/or cleaning cloth or mit in an accessory pack.

DID YOU KNOW: A Piano really has memory! Not the emotional kind. That comes from the owner to the piano for the many years of fond family memories created around the instrument! The memory we are talking about is pitch and tone memory. Strings develop kinks and bends dependent on where they are seated after tuning and if left in that position for years will constantly work themselves back to the same location (or snap at weak points!) when adjusted. Felt hammers will develop groves and density highlighted by the more constantly used areas of the keyboard - making a piano truly the unique instrument personality of it's owner and his/her playing style!

FAQ's

Should I install a lightbulb or piano heater?

This writer is not in favour of installing either, both from a purist and practical view. Using either is like lighting a match in a cold room to stay warm individually – that is fairly useless. You have to treat the room and all the people or pianos in it will benefit! If you just heat the piano in a cold, damp space it is a never-ending battle to get it right! I recommend a dehumidifier to firstly remove excess moisture from the whole room environment (which effectively warms the space). Then you can look at heating the room as necessary to an evenness of temperature avoiding large fluctuations. These variables can cause the timbers in the piano to expand and contract, destabilizing tuning.

Lounge, Bedroom or Basement placement, which is best?

The piano benefits from the way you live your life. If a piano is not already in a studio, being in the general areas of the house will mean that if it is too hot for you, you open a window or activate airconditioning to make your environment more comfortable. If it is too cold, you close the window and provide heating or airconditioning to make it more pleasant for you and your family. If the piano is away in a back room or basement where wild fluctuations in temperature and moisture can occur, then it is far harder to be in constant good care of the piano.

What are the telltale signs of a piano needing maintenance?

Mould appearing on the interior, keys sticking due to excessive moisture, borer insect holes appearing especially in older pianos, birds nests and mouse pellets appearing (I have seen them all); there are so many things to look out for and many owners do not know when a piano is out of tune 'enough' to warrant a technician providing some valuable work on their instrument!

The easy solution is 'prevention is better than cure'. Simply the regular cycle of booking in a qualified Piano Tuner/Technician will ensure that what you don't know about or to even know to ask for, will be taken care of and at a regular interval that will keep your piano in top playing condition for many years! For those having a tech visit annually, the anniversary of the pianos arrival or a special event such as a birthday and at the back-to-school period (February in New Zealand) are good way to remember to have your piano serviced, that will help keep you on top of this important part of piano care. Do this and you should enjoy many years of basically trouble free piano care. 'Care free Piano Care'. Many contemporary technicians will keep you on their books/files, just like the family doctor does!

Whats the value of my piano?

Most pianos have a functional demand of about 10 to 15 years, that is, in the life of a student a 7yr old beginner is often making life decisions as to career choices at 17 – 22 years of age. The good news is that with the effects of inflation and prices rise, in my experience as a 'Rule of Thumb', a good piano will in 10 years be valued at approximately what was paid for it!

Therefore buy a good one – a piano is a great investment in education, culture and value!

What if I'm not happy with the Piano technical work done?

Remember that a piano technicians tuning is his work and he is both responsible to carry out the work, that he owns, whilst at the same time satisfying you the customer. They are providing a service like any other service technician. However a pianos sound is very individual and subjective and is more 'hands on' than many goods require nowadays such as appliances with micro computers that are replaced as a whole part rather than genuine mechanical repairs done. Most Technicians that are good are part of the Tuners Guilds throughout the world and are accredited to a satisfactory standard to safeguard customer confidence.

Most Piano owners do not 'know' pianos. A lot of 'blokes' think they know there cars, or women their fashion trends, but few have spent time learning about their Piano asset. If you find you are unsatisfied with the Technical support or quality of work or simply don't understand what needs to be done, have a discussion with the technician first, and if still unsatisfied or for a second opinion, talk to your local piano supplier, the one you purchased from has an obligation to assist you, and to the Tuners Guild in your area.

Here for your own comparison and enjoyment are a couple of great resources we recommend ...

The Piano Buyer, book by Larry Fine

Piano: A Photographic History of the World's Most Celebrated Instrument, book by David Crombie

I hope you have great success in securing yourself a beautiful piano so you can enjoy the very best that this wonderful instrument can facilitate well into the future – and remember 'there's nothing like a quality piano to enrich your family's lifestyle!'

David Thomas

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR ...

DT David Thomas has been involved in the Music Industry for over 30 years with experience in the Music Retail Industry both in sales and management, being awarded with top sales in New Zealand for YAMAHA Pianos and Musical Instruments numerous years as well as selling other leading brands including KAWAI. DT now runs his own unique business with mobile Sales – Hire – Consultancy - Entertainment and is available **FREEPHONE** on **0800 PIANOS 0800 742 667** Website **www.dtpianosandmusic.com**

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