

HOW TO CHOOSE A PIANO An Article by DT David Thomas

Welcome to the wonderful world of the King of musical instruments known simply as the piano! One of the first things to consider, and something that is quite unique in choosing a piano is that the purchaser is often buying on behalf of someone else, that is, **'by someone, for someone!'** Whether it be parent's buying for a child student, a teacher buying for a school, an administrator (or committee) buying for an institution such as studio, college, university or church, or even an artist advising for a performance venue and so on. This puts the purchaser in the position of needing to decide objectively in the interests of the other person/ people, and this I have found can make the customer feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. It's not like choosing your own car, or a set of golf clubs. And, with the piano instrument itself having been in manufacture for over 300 years, there are plenty of historical pitfalls to look out for! Therefore it is essential to get good advise that can be trusted so that you can make your choice with confidence ... so **ask the experts!**

If you fit into this major category of buying for someone else, particularly parent's buying their first 'real' piano for their children, then **read on, this could be very helpful!** ...

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

In my experience there are general criteria that keep surfacing when it comes to choosing a piano. **The first is the same for any industry and that is price.** This is of special concern to the one whom has the responsibility for the financing, not the one doing the spending! This could be taken as some very stereo-typical male and female roles! 'Is cheap going to be good enough?' 'What about Chinese manufactured instruments?', 'They are all so new and shiny in the shops, what's the difference between the pricing?', 'Should we start with a keyboard?', 'Someone down the street has a real beautiful old piano at a steal for \$200', 'There's a secondhand one on Trade Me that still has it's new warranty!', 'How long will this one last?'... and so on! We deal with apprehension, then we can get to what matters most: the beauty of the sound!

The second criteria is quality, which is not always clear cut. Quality costs, but do you have a clear idea of what is appropriate for the age group, that has the functionality of the high use situation when needed, can meet the requirements of the true performer, fits within a budget that will meet the quality requirements, and how is quality defined? What constitutes a great 'action', the practical interface between the hands and the music of the soul?

Third and closely related is the service offered (or not) with the instrument. We all know that pianos need tuning (standard concert pitch A4 = 440hz). Other more technical requirements also exist such as voicing (evenness and responsiveness of tone) and regulation (efficiency of functioning parts). Also what environmental considerations are there to preserve the best playing condition of the instrument, that you may not be familiar with and these will take a commitment to meet both financially and in the way you care for your piano at home or work where the piano resides.

On top of this a subtle yet very real criteria surfaces constantly, and this is **the aesthetic component, that is, the appearance.** There is no forgetting the piano especially the Grand Piano is an exquisite looking item, a valuable and functional piece of furniture to be appreciated and yes it happens that people do buy pianos on appearance alone and hopefully these get played on social occasions when the

opportunity for a musician to sit down and entertain exists. (*Editors note: see the section on the New 'Digital Player Pianos').

In order to sift through the many criteria from which you could choose your piano, I think it is important to simplify it down (especially for the first piano buyer and 'non-professionals') to a few key guideline ... **BUYERS TIPS**... to help you through! And you will find all the important questions and issues will fall into place along the way.

It is important to keep in mind that the piano by it's very original design, it has to be, and is one of the few things built to last a long time... so get a good one! There is no point in not doing so! Enjoy something that brings so much enhancement to life! There is around 20,000lbs of pressure on the frame of the standard upright piano created by the strings wound tight to pitch and suspended over a steel alloy frame (and iron frames in older models) with supporting wooden beams and multi-layered ply planks (for all-angle strengthening) which would simply buckle under the intense pressures if not built to last.

Keep in mind that the piano... is built to last a long time... so get a good one!

Having disassembled numerous pianos over the years I have witnessed first hand the immense craftsmanship that goes into the design of quality brand pianos.

There is absolutely **no substitute for quality!** So what constitutes more quality than another and what quality is appropriate for me and my situation?

BUYERS TIP: No.1 - The easiest way to ascertain the quality of an instrument is to find out the country of manufacture. The country of manufacturer is 'everything' and by law in New Zealand, new instruments must have the country of manufacture identified (often with a sticker or embossed print or moulded badge) somewhere clearly presented on the instrument. However different countries have different levels of tolerance in their machinery and levels of competency in their workforce. Also in order to keep production costs at a profitable level, there are different levels of durability in the component parts and cabinetry. For example where it is most important is how long is the expected life of the moving and contact parts of the piano action, all those 'fiddly bits in the engine' of the piano, the action parts such as the felts and springs and working wood and synthetic parts of the internal assembly.

A good example among the most critical parts to fault in lower quality pianos are the felt hammers, the parts that strike the strings repeatedly.

DID YOU KNOW: You may be interested to know that in some factories 'robot' machines are utilized to repeatedly strike the keys around a million times and 'bed' in the felts so that the piano is in optimum playing condition ex factory, right out of the box.

Buyer's Tip No.1
Find out the
country of
manufacture.

Inferior felts will 'fluff' out (lose composition density) or harden (become brittle) so that the piano loses it's showroom tone in a few short years and expensive remedial repairs are required. This may include fitting new parts to already inferior and worn actions. Perhaps one of the worst examples I have seen of this, is a leading College in central Auckland installing a low grade Grand Piano for stage work which upon inspection was clearly struggling to maintain accurate tuning consistency under regular and high use in less than 5 years. This piano will cost more to maintain in the long run then getting the right piano for the right usage right away!

At the same time that showroom shine will not last long on inferior pianos. An illustration of the worst examples of this are pianos where the polished laminate finish is peeling off in the showroom!

Secondhand? Take a look under the lid! Whether you are an expert or not, you wouldn't buy a new or used motor vehicle without checking under the bonnet for the general condition of the engine would you? The easiest thing to take a look at is whether the instrument is clean, free of insects especially borer beetles (evidenced by holes which is a risk to other untreated furniture), and any resident vermin (mice pellets are a giveaway for the little rodents that will chew away at vital parts, and yes I've even seen birds nests!).

See if the strings are grey or even spot rusty – this may tell you a lot about where the piano has been kept (even new ones can be in store for many months and deteriorate). Newer strings are bright bronze (actually copper wound) in colour and the plain strings should have a sheen. Strings are surprisingly resilient under immense pressure and seldom break even when old, however breakages will occur where 'kinks' develop and NO it is not advisable that you attack a piano to tune it yourself with plyers – it takes years to train to tune a piano correctly and anything but the correct tools will only damage the parts. Technicians will not sell tradesmans tools (and their livelihood) to novice DIY non-professional tradesmen sorry! (*Editors note: See more in the HOW TO CARE FOR YOUR PIANO article by DT)

*Take a look under
the lid for the
general condition!*

DID YOU KNOW: TRUE OR FALSE? Do Pianos really have memory (and personality!) or not? This writer thinks definitely TRUE! Not quite like an elephant never forgets, but certainly individual character. One reason in part is because after many years the string windings become accustomed to the tension in them and if left long enough between tunings will 'tend' to settle to their historic 'stretched' position, and winding, and characteristic sound. So too the other parts of the piano action have bedded in over many years (decades). Also the string pins that the strings wind around are not in fact screws but made with repeated circular threads giving the piano technician the ability to tune and hold the pianos pitch securely whether loosening or creating more pitch tension. As to personality, you have only to observe a dedicated piano owner recounting stories around the piano as to the vibrant role their own piano has played in their memories with great affection!

*Watch out for...
moisture damage.*

The major thing to watch out for is moisture damage! If there is resident damp, mouldy surfaces and a clear musty smell you can be sure the instrument has been neglected and needs to be professionally evaluated if you are seriously considering purchase. It could be that the only lasting value for the instrument may be the memories!

WARNING! We do not recommend that you transport your piano yourself!

Local delivery is generally included in this friendly industry with the purchase of new and used pianos commercially – if not ask for it! However on piano transfers or second hand sales we do not recommend you do this yourself – use the professionals. The correct tools of trade include a proper load-bearing piano trolley, tray for bigger Grand Pianos and strapping and covers to prevent damage. The professionals use proven handling techniques, safety equipment and vehicles (including tail-lift trucks). If not handled correctly there is risk of injury! Save yourself the hassle and get it done properly. Among my experiences of the most elaborate deliveries have been cranes lifting pianos to top floors of high rise 10 - 12 storey apartment blocks in the Auckland CBD or refitting lifts to get pianos in on their 'teeth' edge.

Watch for ‘The Hiccup’ – some manufacturers disguise the true identity of what country the piano comes from by importing the assembly from lower level sources as if their own. Still others use traditional European (e.g. german-sounding ‘...stein’) branding to convey international involvement and credibility in the design. Your biggest safeguard is to ask the professionals who have the full manufacturers designs available and do your own online research. A huge advantage with the internet nowadays.

Then there have been multi-national company takeovers, buying into the expertise of others (the older established brands); and various cost cutting compromises reducing the quality in some cases of reputable brands by inferior offshore manufacture whilst maintaining the original name – do the research!

What are the benefits of buying new? – Piano manufacturers producing instruments for the world market recognize that these fine instruments made of natural woods and mechanical action parts are sensitive to the differing world environments, especially humidity and temperature fluctuations. Therefore they are ‘moisture treated’ by controlling the amount of water absorption in the materials over time and prepared during manufacture in control rooms to best assimilate the country of destination. This ‘tropicalisation’ is guaranteed in your new piano and is not controlled in used instruments brought in privately to New Zealand from another country. Therefore a major advantage to purchasing new are the factory guarantees (usually limited to a year and expanded by the local distributor up to 12 years).

However, used imports that have been properly accredited will also be acclimatized as a secondary treatment. Ask any dealer about the ‘Grade’ of their imported pianos before you buy on price, (Grade ‘A’ being best through to ‘C’ or ‘D’ reflected in very low prices, greater age and poorer condition... and not recommended having had their best performance ‘life’ already).

Also, established businesses with solid reputations that have stood the test of time and offer a level of expertise are not the same as opportunists dabbling in the market for a quick buck at the expense of the unwary!

*‘Tropicalisation’ is
guaranteed with
your new piano.*

BUYERS TIP: No.2 – Evaluate what the piano needs to do for you ... and how long. You may want your child to progress well on piano but are working to a tight budget. The simple fact of the matter is, you might not need the piano to be a top performer and a less expensive instrument will do the job if chosen wisely. However you do need to get sufficient quality that will not hold the child back, that sluggish action to watch out for – back to the golf clubs scenario: what would you buy for yourself? ‘bulk warehouse cheapies’ or ‘Pro store starter packages’ or Pro sets new or used. Often what you buy for your children is a reflection of what you would buy for yourself! Then again you may have top level, regular and often piano usage in a scholastic or concert setting within a fixed budget... all kinds of scenarios exist as many as peoples/ organisations resources. Perhaps the worst situation is concert halls that go overbudget on building costs, underspending on the very instrument that is central to the venue!

Consider what is the **actual practical application of the instrument**. Here is some interesting observations from my sales experience that I have seen repeated many times over many years of retail: Most parents buy their piano for their child at around 7 to 13 years of age. Therefore the expected ‘life’ use of the piano at home is around 10-12 years – about the same length as the new warranty provided by most distributors in NZ. This means that by the time the warranty runs out, the student is a young adult and looking at moving into their targeted tertiary studies that may or might not involve music as their major. It may involve moving into restricted flatting or boarding situations and the piano is left idle for a time. This is why a lot of pianos appear second hand for sale at around 10 – 15 years of use and why also it is false to attempt to pass on any residual guarantees as this breach is clearly stated on most

warranties, ie that the warranty is only valid to the original purchaser. Anyone wishing to give a warranty with a piano on a private sale will in fact be carrying it themselves!

DID YOU KNOW: The modern 'Piano' was originally called the 'PIANOFORTE' or 'FORTEPIANO', literally 'soft' and 'loud' in Italian and credited to the work (without prior design precedent) in the 1700's of Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655 – 1731) whom solved the fundamental characteristics of the piano action. That is, how to remove the hammer from the string once it has been struck so that the note can continue to 'ring' rather than be simultaneously muted ('dampened'). That would be much like any lever if you imagine a child's 'see-saw' that can be suspended in the air at one end whilst pressing and holding down the other. Such were the limitations and hence the 'staccato' fugue compositions on keyboard instruments at the time. Once the addition of pedal mechanisms for entire controlled 'dampening' effect when desired was invented this new advancement captured the creative imagination of the genius master composers such as Beethoven, Mozart and Bach.

Buyer's Tip No.2
**Evaluate what
 the piano needs
 to do for you.**

Over time the name became shortened to just 'Piano' in common use as we know it today.

Whereas, the saying 'My 'Joanna'', meaning 'My Piano', is a derivative of East End London Cockney rhyming slang.

Therefore the lowest common denominator is 'what are the essential non-negotiable requirements of your piano selection?'. What level do you envisage your youngster or you, your school, church, university or venue etc require to meet the performance demands. How regular will it be played? What is the size of the space and position to be filled: lounge, studio, stage, theatre etc. What colour will match nicely with the surroundings (of course the piano must be the main feature). Some of these decisions are merely you deciding your preferences.

NOTE: Black, that is, Ebony High Polish (rather than satin) tends to be the most popular colour choice (and the least expensive to produce). Woodgrain finishes require laminated finishes and veneers and are more elaborate and expensive to produce. Solid wood finishes are rarer today in Uprights and very heavy as with some of the recent British manufacturers.

*What are the essential
 non – negotiable
 requirements?*

Make a list of the requirements you have decided on and take it shopping with you! ...

(And, then it won't be so easy to be distracted away from them once you see the shiny new ones in the showroom!).

The following INFORMATION is a general guideline for the varying sizes, descriptions, functional applications and colours of pianos ...

TABLE 1 (As at 2012)	PIANO MODELS	
UPRIGHT MODELS...	<u>Description</u>	<u>Application</u>
<u>CONSOLE 108cm to circa118cm</u>	Small to mid-range	Home student, teaching, small studio
NOTE: Smaller spinet models have been manufactured in the past but tend not to be popular outside of the USA and can be found in used markets. Colours: Greatest variety available including Ebony, and the slightly more expensive Mahogany, Walnut woodgrains, (include High polish and Satin options and special colours such as White, Ivory and novelty colours like Red and Blue! <i>'Most first piano buyers will purchase or seriously evaluate this as their first choice new'</i>		
<u>PROFESSIONAL circa121cm</u>	Ideal large sonority	School, church, serious student, small theatre, hall, artist rehearsal
Colours: Generally Ebony Polish with less and more expensive Mahogany and Walnut woodgrain options available. <i>'The most popular selling size piano world wide for the ideal quality tone in any space, and most often made available second hand (Japanese used and refurbished imports)'</i>		
<u>PROFESSIONAL circa 132cm</u>	Very large emulating a small Grand (with sostenuto pedal)	Limited space concert venue or pit orchestra, high level performer, education
Colours: Predominantly Ebony Polish. <i>'Larger than general for a serious performance level and additional volume'</i>		
<u>GRAND PIANO MODELS...</u>		
<u>'BABY' 142cm to circa155cm</u>	Lighter toned esp. bass	Home, small studio, church, venue
Colours: Generally Ebony Polish with less and more expensive Mahogany, Walnut woodgrain, white options available. <i>'Generally purchased as a small and functional home use piano'</i>		
<u>MID SIZE circa 172cm to 186cm</u>	Medium, full tone	Large home, studio, church, college stage
Colours: Generally Ebony Polish with less and more expensive Mahogany, Walnut woodgrain, white options available. <i>'The most popular choice new and used to get the sonority and expressive levels on a longtime purchase!'</i>		
<u>SEMI- CONCERT circa 200cm to 227cm</u>	Large, for most 'big' occasions	Large studio, stage, church, college, University, Large auditorium
Colours: Generally Ebony Polish with less and more expensive Mahogany, Walnut woodgrain, white options available. <i>'The largest size in common exposure to the general public where ever popular music, recorded and live may be found!'</i>		
<u>CONCERT circa 275cm (9ft)</u>	Full concert supreme tone	Concert stage, orchestral performance
Colours: Predominantly Ebony Polish or Satin <i>'This is the pinnacle of achievement and flagship of only the top piano manufacturers in the world and with a price tag that goes with it like that of an elite european production sports car only the best performers can bring out the best in these magnificent King of instruments!'</i>		

BUYERS TIP: No.3 – **Buy the best you can to last the distance.** Because pianos last such a long time, and are needed for such a long time (generally for at least 10 - 12 years of home use), buy quality that will last the distance with the least amount of concerns and maintenance and it will cost you less in the long run! Both financially and peace-of-mind in that you are doing the best for your child, family, school, club, church, auditorium, college, university, venue and so on...

And ... because quality pianos are built to last they generally **Hold good \$ value**. That is, not so much as an appreciable asset (although in some cases the right kind of piano will increase in selling value) but in terms of holding value. It has been my experience to see countless times over the years as new prices escalate with inflation, pianos held for about ten years will sell for around a similar price to what was paid for them!

Buyer's Tip No.3
**Buy the best you
 can to last the
 distance.**

DID YOU KNOW: Most customers (in my experience) that no longer play piano comment that they wish they had continued with piano lessons as a youngster because they would love to be able to play the piano and enjoy music-making as part of their lifestyle as an adult!

A STORY WORTH READING...

One of the toughest stories that comes to mind for a customer choosing a piano ... and I always aim to satisfy customers and never have a dissatisfied customer... was one instance I experienced in a store in which I was selling, that against my best advise to the customer, they proceeded to buy a piano (based on price alone) that I advised would be inadequate quality for their useage. This compared to other better quality models on offer at the store in a usual parent - buying - for - child scenario. Sure enough within a comparatively small amount of time (just two or three years) the customer returned with complaints about the pianos tuning failure, loss of action efficiency (becoming sluggish) through rapid wear (on inferior parts) and general piano cabinet condition and presentation deteriorating. ... I have often said that the outer cabinet is just the fancy box wrap that you take the real instrument, the piano inside, home in! However the cabinets condition is often a reflection of the quality of manufacture throughout the entire piano ... Anyway, whilst we had no obligation under the legal safeguards to customers on 'changing their minds' I offered a full exchange in goodwill against the purchase of a new and better instrument!

A lot of frustration could have been saved him if he had bought quality in the first place!

*There's nothing like a
 quality piano to enrich
 your family's lifestyle!*
 - DT

DID YOU KNOW: Pianos can be dated by the serial numbers on them (esp. leading brands) and the country of origin confirmed. You can go on line to various websites that give you the manufacturing details at your fingertips. Why is that important? ... There is a table coming up in this article that you will want to review!

FINANCE DEALS – Like anything the interest payments on financing loans or longer term credit cards can be a dis-incentive and a barrier to the purchase of a piano. However the finance charges are in fact cheaper for the more furniture-like and conservative marketplace of the piano-buyer than other consumer categories. Furthermore Interest- Free policies are now commonplace on new products including pianos and so can be an attractive option.

When looking at the purchase of your new piano ask about **Interest free** finance options.

HIRE TO BUY – Hiring an instrument first where offered, including a piano can be a great way to start your children off with a musical instrument. You have the right of return without obligation but also utilizing the hireage paid (usually up to a full 12 months worth) as a credit against the purchase of the instrument gives a double benefit to your money spent and is effectively Interest free purchasing!

The following INFORMATION is a general guideline to some of the more common brands available in New Zealand (or of interest to New Zealanders) over recent years ...

TABLE 2 (As at 2012)**PIANO BRANDS**

<u>BRAND</u>	<u>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</u>	<u>REFERENCE</u>
AEOLIAN Manufacturer of organs and then Player Pianos, part of American Piano Company	USA	discontinued
AUGUST FOERSTER Classic German brand in and out of family privatisation	Germany	www.august-foerster.de
BALDWIN Popular piano owned by Gibson Guitars, now manufacturing in China along with the Wurlitzer brand	USA	www.gibson.com
BEALE Originally Australian manufactured, OEM 'stencil' style for Australia- NZ	China	see Pearl River Piano Group
(C.) BECHSTEIN Royal customers are listed on the soundboard	Germany	www.bechstein.com
BENTLEY, BRINSMEAD, CHALLENGE, COLLARD, EAVESTAFF, KNIGHT, MONINGTON & WESTON, and many more... Famous old British pianos of varying qualities, now out of production and found abundantly secondhand post war since the 1950s	England	discontinued
BERNSTEIN Made for the Australia/ NZ market	Korea	see Samick
BLUTHNER Performers from Brahms to the Beatles	Germany	www.bluthnerworld.com
BOSEDORFER Produces the biggest range piano with 102 keys! Performers include Oscar Peterson, company now owned by Yamaha Corporation	Austria	www.bosendorfer.com
BOSTON Middle level pianos made more economically for Steinway by Kawai	Japan	see Steinway & Sons
BROADWOOD Mozart, Haydyn, Liszt, Beethoven & Chopin all performed on these 'breakthrough design' instruments	England	www.piano-tuners.org/broadwood/
CHAPPELL The original Printed Music Distributor produced popular pianos and was sold in the 80's to Warner Bros.	England	discontinued
CHICKERING Made famous supplied to the 'Swedish Nightingale' on tour, part of American Piano Company	USA	see Baldwin
DANEMANN Wales own instrument, suppliers to Harrods of London	England	www.danemannpianos.co.uk
ERARD The pioneering choice of numerous masters including Liszt	France	discontinued
ESSEX Steinway initiative built by Pearl River Piano Group	China/ Indonesia	see Steinway & Sons
FALCONE Recent manufacturer taking on Samick and Young Chang in Korea	China	see Sejung Corporation
FAZIOLI A recently formed company produces the world's most luxurious and longest Grand piano at 10ft (& 2inches)!	Italy	http://www.fazioli.com/en/
FEURICH A German company restructuring with Austrian roots	Germany	www.feurich.com
GROTRIAN Another BVK Made in Germany manufacture with a long history in Europe including luxury models.	Germany	www.grotrian.com
HOFFMAN A cheaper line for Bechstein made in the Czech Republic	Czech Rep	see Bechstein
HUPFELD, ZIMMERMANN Classic manufacturers merging in Europe in the 1900s	German	see Bechstein
IBACH Old 7th generation German company supplier to Richard Wagner and many others	Germany	www.ibach.de
IRMLER Another Leipzig, Germany piano made under Bluthner pianos	German	www.irmler-piano.com
KAWAI Major competitive Japanese manufacturer of rich traditional- sounding quality pianos in contrast to Yamaha	Japan	www.kawaius.com
KEMBLE Recent North London manufacturer working with Yamaha since 1968	England	www.kemble-pianos.com
KIMBALL The world's largest manufacturer in 1969 out of Chicago	USA	discontinued

TABLE 2 Continued

<u>BRAND</u>	<u>COUNTRY OF ORIGIN</u>	<u>REFERENCE</u>
Wm. KNABE & CO Manufactured out of Baltimore, Maryland, various takeovers, part of American Piano Company	USA	see Samick
KOHLER & CAMPBELL Originally from New York, now out of Samick, Korea	Korea/ Indonesia	see Samick
MASON & HAMLIN Out of Massachusetts, in golden age of Rachmaninoff & Ravel, owned now by PianoDisc	USA	www.masonhamlin.com
NORDISKA Originally high ranking pianos from Sweden bought out by Dongbei Co.	China	www.nordiskapiano.cn
OVERS Innovative recent designed pianos from the Southern Hemisphere	Australia	www.overspianos.com.au
PEARL RIVER PIANO GROUP Largest Chinese and world piano manufacturer, out of Guangzhou with links to Yamaha, Steinway and USA in expansion	China	www.pearlriverusa.com
PETROF 5th Generation family company surviving many politic changes	Czech Republic	www.petrof.com
PIANODISC Brought the original Player Piano and Pianocorder (cassette) into the modern digital age	USA	www.pianodisc.com
PLEYEL Famous manufacturer to Chopin like many of the classics succumbed to cheaper competition in 2013	France	www.pleyel.fr
QRS An original 1900's Piano Roll producer for 'Pianonola' still producing today with newer digital technologies in Story & Clark Pianos	USA	www.qrsmusic.com
RITMULLER Higher- fashioned Pianos form the Yamaha- Pearl River connection.	China	see Pearl River Piano Group
RONISCH Classic choice of Rachmaninoff, now the company is merged with Bluthner near Leipzig	Germany	www.roenisch-pianos.de
SAMICK Recent major player has invested also into Steinway and competitors	Korea	www.smcpianos.com
SCHIMMEL Innovative and contemporary family owned Piano manufacturers	Germany	www.schimmel-pianos.de
SOHMER Another German migrant company in New York, featured aliquot stringing and agraffes eventually moved to Samick.Music Corp.	Korea	www.smcpianos.com
STEINWAY Historic manufacturer in two locations used by leading artists on concert stages around the world	USA, Germany	www.steinway.com/.de
STUART & SONS Indigenous timbers and up to 102 keys (14 more than usual) feature on these unique production pianos from 'down under'.	Australia	www.stuartandsons.com
SUZUKI The environmental philosophy in music education found on namesake digitals and OEM acoustic pianos	Japan	www.suzuki.com
TOYO, ATLAS, RUBINSTEIN ... Minor Japanese productions in/out of manufacture	Japan	some... discontinued
WEBER, ALBERT WEBER Classic instrument chosen by royalty and popes, now a production of Young Chang, Korea	USA	www.weberpiano.com
WEINBACH, ROSLER More affordable range out of the Petrof stable	Czech Republic	see Petrof
WELMAR, MARSHALL & ROSE British manufacturer following Squire & Longson, distributed by Whelpdale Maxwell & Codd	England	discontinued
WERTHEIM Original Melbourne, Australian company and still distributing as Piano Time, manufactured by Young Chang Korea	Australia/Korea	www.wertheimpiano.com
YAMAHA Nippon Gakki Co. the multi-national conglomerate with the huge product range is the world's largest musical instrument manufacturer including Disklavier and Silent Pianos.	Japan	www.yamaha.com
YOUNG CHANG One of the big two South Korean companies also owns electronic Kurzweil Music Systems and ws sold to Hyundai Dev Co.	Korea	www.youngchang.com
ZIMMERMANN Started by a Steinway USA worker in Leipzig, Germany, taken over by Bechstein as an economy line	Germany	www.bechstein.com

DIGITAL PIANOS v ACOUSTIC PIANOS – In any discussion between the pros and cons of the two it needs to first be understood, and this is where it gets a bit technical, that modern technology as good as it is still has not conquered the ability to capture the subtle nuances of the ‘real thing’. I liken it to dropping a pebble in a still lake where a ripple is started and sent out in all directions – modern digital instruments provide a great simulation, in fact direct recording in effect of this. However what modern digital instruments don’t do, is give a true response to a second and then multiple pebbles thrown into the lake where the ripples, that is soundwaves, collide. How is ‘it’ to know and calculate the complex computations required to reproduce the correct harmonic ‘collisions’ (overtones) and therein beauty that comes with harmony, then blending of notes, and then in quick succession, that a real acoustic instrument does automatically when the strings are struck. The modern digital instrument can only emulate singular notes ‘together’ and the sound soon breaks up into a distorting noise!

Another analogy is using mathematics whereby ‘the whole is greater than the sum of it’s parts’. Taking one note there are harmonic qualities other than the principle and greatest volume note of a string length. Then add to this another note and then another till you have say 4 notes sounding simultaneous, the combined notes and harmonic tones are not just 4 sounds, but at least $4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 = 4^4$.

However, having said that, the modern digital instrument has a lot of advantages. The digital instrument (often referred to in various ways, with various emphasis in features, i.e. electric/electronic piano/keyboard/organ, digital piano or keyboard, Synthesizer, Workstation ...) is far easier to control in the modern music ensemble such as pop bands with direct plug in feed to amplification and recording devices (no microphones/ pick-ups required as in an acoustic piano) and with there being less individual clarity to the component instruments in the complete form, the digital instrument is more than able to hold it’s own and cut through in the ‘mix’.

There is no maintenance or tuning required, and they are a lot easier to move around than a traditional piano!

Another plus of course is that for the contemporary instrumentalist the drums and percussion and automated backing features complete with record (including publishing directly to the internet) are goodies not to be refused! There are standard onboard metronomes and interactive performance rehearsal features with libraries of inbuilt and expandable music selections to enjoy, and well... the technology keeps expanding!

Another ‘key’ feature and that is a hint, is that the action to emulate real weight of 88 wooden keys (in some cases wood is used) is highly efficient, with greater consistency of action than many pianos especially older ageing pianos! I actually recommend these incredible new instruments over secondhand pianos 40 years and older unless you are expert or get expert enough advise to get a ‘goodie’!

A digital being electronic and constantly up for review with new model manufacturing at an alarming rate will not hold it’s value like a piano, but offers you real value technology to enjoy the many features and functions here and now. Like any electronic device that obsoletes against newer models the value will go down quickly. Parts on repairs are usually produced for only 10 years.

It may suit your lifestyle in that flatting or boarding situation where you can rehearse without any external noise on a digital instrument, through plug in headphones, and often two headphone options for paired up listening (and Dad can still watch the cricket on TV without being interrupted in a busy family room!)

If you are considering the purchase of a digital or piano, my advise is to get both – **they both offer so much!** And really the Digital Piano instrument has come in to it’s own, as an instrument in it’s own right –

- and still there is nothing like a really good acoustic piano! So good have digital instruments become that the most critical International Examination Boards will except them as instruments for exam performance.

So seriously if it has to be one or the other, then you must decide on the values you will have established through the buying process. Remember the buying tips: country of manufacture (quality), specific needs (service) and best value that will last the distance (price, value and durability).

NEW DIGITAL 'PLAYER' PIANOS – A fascinating new development in recent years is the combination of acoustic and digital technologies. Take a close look at video recordings on TV, Video, YouTube and other media and you will find that many major artists are using these combined instruments in all fields of piano music – Classical, Pop, Jazz, Rock etc.

A fascinating new development is the combination of acoustic and digital technologies

A few of the major manufacturers have developed this technology enabling piano students and artisans to experience the attributes of the real piano with all the benefits of modern technology per digital instruments: Record and perform streaming live over the internet with sonic clarity (YAMAHA have an Annual International Disklavier competition over the internet without participants leaving their own city!). Other technologies enable the pianist of every level to witness and even play along with the performances of contemporary masters reproduced with full orchestral backing on their own piano complete with the keys going up and down with each keystroke of the master! Recorded or live (via internet) ... Wow!

DID YOU KNOW: Man has always had a fascination with music replication. The original Player Pianos of which few survive in good working order in New Zealand today, predate the first disc recordings, and were the 'recording device' and local source of entertainment when musicians weren't available. Operated by the feet pumping the pedals to rotate the mechanism (a bit like a bicycle) holding paper rolls with holes cut in them strategically to engage notes through an air pump system at the right place in the music brought to life the music of the masters. Abundant titles were available with surprising clarity and accuracy, and the performers that provided the original 'tracking' were extremely efficient, similar to the demands on another pianist form of the day- silent movie score pianists! Even duet performers doing multiple hand pieces of music which would otherwise be impossible to play. However, the speed of the music would depend on the speed and consistency (and endurance!) of the soul pumping the pedals!

FINALLY ... I will set out a handy comparison, not usually seen, of the best known brands in the contemporary NZ market of today! ...

I will reveal what I believe to be the ranking of pianos from around the world that we commonly see in New Zealand in my experience, so you can decide for yourself!

PLEASE NOTE: The following table is a general assessment of the marketplace in my opinion at the time of writing and cannot be considered a full scientific analysis of all brands nor cater for the dynamic changes that manufacturers make to reposition themselves in the market...

TABLE 3 (As at 2012)**GENERAL PIANO RANKINGS of the best known brands in NZ****LEVEL A: SUPREME PERFORMANCE**

The Big Four: Steinway, Bluthner, Bechstein, Bosendorfer AND in more recently, Fazioli

Country of manufacture: Germany, Italy, USA

LEVEL B: MOST POPULAR HIGH QUALITY

Yamaha, Kawai, AND Schimmel, Ronisch

Country of manufacture: Japan, Germany

LEVEL C: THE NEW MARKET PLAYERS

Samick, Young Chang

Country of manufacture: Korea

AND off shore for Yamaha, Kawai

Country of manufacture: Indonesia

LEVEL D: ECONOMICAL, BULK END

Pearl River

Country of manufacture: China

AND off shore for many major manufacturers

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

FREephone 0800 PIANOS (0800 742 667)

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 other leading brands. 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**

Disclaimer: Please note that this article is designed to assist the widest customer base, and in particular first piano buyers in New Zealand, with the minimum amount of technical and professional jargon. Details are shared in good faith and accurate to the best of the writer's knowledge at the time of writing. No responsibility is accepted for manufacturer's changes without notice or any buying decision by any consumer based on the advice contained in this article or on information from the dtpianosandmusic website. This article is © David Thomas 2012/2014. It is free for general readership to enjoy for your own use. No part may be commercially reproduced without permission of the author. Contact DT on dt@dtpianosandmusic.com.