

# A Guide For Parents Of Piano Students



## Introduction



Congratulations on introducing your child to the enjoyment of music!

This flyer is designed to familiarise you with the world of keyboards and pianos, so that you understand the equipment required to support your child's musical development.

Don't forget – there are three things that ensure your child's musical success:

- a good teacher (you've got that one covered!)
- good encouragement at home
- and a good instrument to support their development.

Happy music making!

## Keyboards



Many people start their musical life on a keyboard. Keyboards are a fun and exciting way to introduce your youngster to the world of music!

A keyboard suitable for learning should have a minimum of 61 keys (a piano has 88). The keys should be the same size (width) as a piano, so your child becomes comfortable with stretching their hand.

Keyboards have a computer generated sound, played back through its speakers. Of course, better quality keyboards have a better sound and are more enjoyable to play. Keyboards offer fun features that capture the attention of youngsters in the 4 to 7 years age bracket. This can include songs to play and sing along with.

To understand when keyboards are useful and why you will progress beyond this step, let's compare three performance factors:

**Volume Range:** Keyboards with *Touch Response* will play softer when played gently, and become louder as you play with more force. This teaches your child's brain to relate to what their hands are doing. It also allows some variation to the sound, which makes for an enjoyable playing experience. Keyboards with touch response start from around \$389.

**Tonal Change:** Keyboards generally do not offer tonal change or expression.

**Touch:** Keyboards have a spring mechanism under the keys that, when pushed down, activates the sound. After learning to get the notes right, the student will need to start "making music" and using expression in their playing. This basic level of touch does not allow students to develop "control" in piano playing.

**In Summary:** Keyboards are a great start, especially because they are fun to play and good value for money, but do not give students a platform to develop their skills. Perhaps consider purchasing one from a shop that gives you an "upgrade" option in a couple of years.

## Digital Pianos



Digital Pianos are the next step in musical development. Like keyboards, they reproduce a sampled piano sound but, because of their better sound samples and more-powerful sound systems, digital pianos can achieve a good volume range and sometimes a good range of expression too.

Some parents choose to skip the digital piano step and go straight to selecting a good piano. However, digital pianos certainly have their benefits and are ideal if you don't have the budget for a suitable quality piano. Digital pianos don't require tuning and maintenance, so you know it's a reliable instrument for your child. They save some space and can have some useful features, like built in Metronome (to learn skills of good timing) and connection for Headphones (bliss for parents!). Let's consider the three factors:

**Volume Range:** Compact or portable digital pianos still have smaller speakers, like keyboards. Therefore they are limited in volume range. Cabinet-style digital pianos have larger speakers (there's more space to put them in!) and have more power and better volume range.

**Tonal Change:** Generally, digital pianos are sampled from mid range or high-quality traditional pianos. Each note is sampled at different velocities so that you don't just hear a louder sound, but also the change in the character of the sound. Good pianos achieve a warm, rich sound quality when they are played softly. As you get louder, the sound should "come to life" – and become bright and brassy. Good digital pianos can give you an introduction to this tonal change and assist your child in developing their skills of expression and making real music! Remember, with all musical instruments, there are budget, mid-range and premium quality brands to choose from.

**Touch:** The keyboard-to-hammer action of a real piano has almost 5,500 moving parts and is difficult to reproduce. It relies on the pianist controlling this mechanism to produce a range of sound, and gravity to provide resistance.

The action on digital pianos are mostly Weighted (with some counterweights to give resistance as you push down) or Weighted Hammer Actions (weighted with a better mechanism that simulates some of the movements of a piano hammer). Technology has allowed these actions to be very responsive and comfortable. This touch allows your child an introduction to the skills that they will need to develop for piano playing.

**In Summary:** Digital pianos can be a fantastic "next step" that introduces some of the performance of a piano and can start to develop some of the skills required for piano playing. Keep an eye on when you are ready to consider the performance benefits of a quality acoustic (real) piano.

# Pianos

Pianos have been treasured in family homes for more than 300 years. And it really is true; that there is nothing like playing a real piano.



Pianos have looked quite similar over their history. They have operated in a similar manner too; whereby a key controls a hammer that hits the string to produce sound waves that are made audible because of the soundboard. So, why then do pianos range in price from \$1000 to \$300,000? What really is the difference?

Firstly, new technology has done wonders for the piano in terms of performance, durability, reliability and economy. Today's recognised manufacturers pride themselves on their design, specifications and value for money.

To keep it simple, let's focus on the performance of pianos, because this is what your developing youngster will need. Serious performance skills; those of control, precision, expression, and accurate timing can only be developed on a good piano. Please note that we say "good" piano, not a cheapie from the internet. When your child practices on an instrument that responds well to them, their skills and confidence will improve and their teacher's job will be greatly supported.

It is not possible to give you a "recommendation" of your piano requirements here, for that you would need to visit a trusted piano store for personalised advice. We can, though, offer you an insight into the difference between pianos and suggest guidelines for your piano research. So, looking at the three factors:

## **Volume Range:**

The volume range of a piano, from soft to loud is measured in decibels and varies dramatically in pianos of different specifications and ages. This is for a number of reasons. A piano could have a poor volume range because the soundboard has flattened and doesn't project the sound well. The action may be loose and not give the player good control of the volume. The reasons are many!

Volume range is important, firstly because, this is what a "pianoforte" is designed to do – the name literally means "soft loud". Volume range also gives variation to the sound. It teaches the brain to relate to what the hands are doing, and to adjust accordingly.

## **Tonal Change:**

Pianos produce 'partials' of sound that can be measured and graphed. On a high-performance piano, this varies from warm, smooth and rich, through to brassy, bright and vibrant. Tonal change is probably the most important, and most ignored, feature of a good piano. This is also the most crucial feature required to develop performance skills. It's pretty safe to say you will never get tonal change from a cheap piano or one purchased online. Save your money until you can buy a good one, or consider a payment plan.

Tonal change allows you to put expression into your playing, to evoke emotion and paint pictures with your music. Many teachers say this is the difference between achieving a "B" and an "A" in exams; when students have the skill to control the dynamics of a piano. Playing piano is more than just getting the notes right. Good expression in playing can only be achieved and developed on a piano with a good range of tone.

## **Touch:**

As mentioned, the action piano (the key to hammer assembly) has 5,500 moving parts. The design and quality of this assembly have a number of repercussions for the pianist. Most importantly, in control. It really is like having good power steering in your car. To be able to play with expression and utilise the volume range, the pianist needs to accurately control how the hammer hits the string. A good action, with sufficient key length, leverage and smooth movement, allows the pianist to move the hammers how they desire. In addition, a good piano should have a fast key repetition, so you can play notes quickly. There's nothing worse than the piano not keeping up with you!

Touch also matters because the pianist must be comfortable. Professional pianos with more back-pressure are certainly enjoyable for high-level pianists, but may be too heavy and difficult for a youngster to play. A balance of comfort and control ensure playing enjoyment and development.

## **An UPRIGHT or a GRAND Piano?**

A good grand piano gives you the highest performance and supports serious skill development that cannot be achieved on an upright piano. This includes unmatched playing control for the pianist because you have a larger action mechanism and, in addition, use gravity to control how the hammer hits the string. Grand pianos can also produce more volume (thanks to their larger soundboards) and greater dynamic change (due to longer string length and other factors). This allows for a more expressive performance. In addition, the experience of sitting at a grand piano and looking at its beautiful mechanics is a pianist's dream!

## **In Summary:**

There is nothing that can match the enjoyment, and skills development that a student can achieve on a good piano. A quality piano will be a delight to play. It will encourage a desire for playing and provide a platform for students to do very well. It will be a charming addition to your home and, when cared for well, will be a lifelong musical partner.

## *Where do I start?*

Buying a piano can be a daunting experience - but it doesn't have to be!

The friendly team at Bernies Music Land are here to help make your choice an informed one. Please phone us on 9872 5122 for a free Piano Buyers Guide. Then make some time to come and step through the Five Categories of Pianos. We will introduce you to the world of pianos and familiarise you with what your money buys.

We will chat through many factors and make a recommendation to suit your needs, goals and budget. With over 140 new and pre-loved pianos in stock, there is sure to be one with your name on it. So, come and have a wonderful experience here at Bernies Music Land.

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