

# *Barb Hall, Certified Piano Technician*

## **Buying a Used Piano**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The decision to purchase a piano is a very important one. Many questions come to a person's mind such as: How much do I spend on a piano? How do I know I'm getting a good instrument? What other costs might be involved in the purchase of a piano? What if I buy one and my children decide they don't want to play anymore?

It is hoped that this brochure will help to answer these and the many other questions that might be asked while making this very important purchase.

### **MAKING THE COMMITMENT**

It is important to treat your decision to enroll your child in piano lessons and subsequently purchase an instrument as a lengthy commitment, not only in money invested, but in time spent as well.

In order to succeed at this commitment, three things are necessary. In no particular order, these things are the desire to learn and practice, a good teacher, and a good instrument. If any one of these components are compromised or missing, the student is unlikely to achieve what could potentially be a budding musical talent.

The purpose of this brochure is not to tell you how to motivate your children to practice, or tell you how to find a good teacher. It will however, attempt to tell you how to buy a good instrument.

### **AVOID JUNK!!**

Okay, so how do you tell if a piano is junk? It's not always easy, but here are a few guidelines which experience has dictated should be followed when starting your search.

#### **"The Antique Piano"**

First of all - and this can't be stressed enough - **THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN ANTIQUE PIANO!!** Sorry to yell, but this is the most common mistake people make when buying a piano. They've somehow ascertained that the instrument is a certain age or older, determined it to be "antique", and snatched it up, thinking they've found an object of incredible value that museums will someday be offering them money for. 99 times out of 100, when this happens, the piano ends up being a worthless piece of junk.

The mistake made is this: confusing a beautiful exterior with a mechanically sound interior. More people will buy a piano for its appearance without realizing how complex the instrument inside the box is. It is an illusion people have formed over time that pianos last forever, and that they somehow magically maintain themselves and never wear out. It is much like buying a car simply because you like the paint job without getting a mechanic to look at it. So, the cabinet may be antique, but the instrument is **OLD!**

#### **"I Got a Great Deal"**

Many people will buy a piano based strictly on its price and will mistake a low price with a "good deal". Be aware, **if there are truly any deals out there, most piano dealers will have purchased them before the newspapers even hit the streets.**

People also seem to forget that paying for a piano is not the end of the line. The piano has to be moved to its new home, and depending on the style and size of the instrument, and the distance it must go, a move can cost anywhere from \$150 to \$500. And if it only needs a tuning, that can run anywhere from \$75 to \$100. Of course, any repairs necessary would also be extra. All of this hassle without any kind of warranty or satisfaction guaranteed!

Remember, you have made the decision to play the piano, not the violin or the flute and it is **NOT** an inexpensive instrument, even for a beginner.

### **"I Got it at an Auction for \$100"**

Pianos that end up at auctions are generally there because a) a technician has inspected it and certified it as "junk", b) a dealer has accepted it as a trade-in on another sale and decided it's more to fix it than it's worth, c) it's a "birdcage" piano, a type of action invented in England that should have just stayed there. Rarely, and that can't be stressed enough, there are some good ones, but that is the exception and not the rule.

Bottom line, auctions should also be considered graveyards for pianos, and we should let them rest in "pieces". The same can be said for "charitable donation stores". If you want to donate to these worthy causes, don't do so by buying a piano from them.

### **"Is that a good name?"**

It's a colossal mistake to purchase a piano simply because you've heard the name. There are literally hundreds of thousands of names of pianos, and some are so obscure or the company made so few pianos that they are unknown even to the most experienced piano technicians.

The best way to decide if you like a piano is to play it. All pianos are different - even if two were made side by side by the same person in the factory, their touch or tone may differ. Think of them as people, each with their own "musical" fingerprint or personality. If you find one you really like, that should be the one you buy, regardless of the name on the front of it. Nobody can really help you make that decision, as deciding what tone you like is a truly subjective thing, much like a favourite colour or scent.

### **DEAL WITH A TECHNICIAN**

So how do you avoid these common tragedies? One way to be sure you're not getting a lemon is to have a **Certified Piano Technician** look at the piano **BEFORE** you buy it (not after you've brought it home).

You will have to pay a technician for this service, called an assessment, but it will be well worth it. A piano technician has special tools (not available at your local hardware store) that he or she can use to assess the age, condition, and "musicality" of the instrument. This highly trained specialist can tell you if the price you're being asked to pay is fair and if any work is required, and at what cost. It is not uncommon for a client to truly believe they have a good instrument, only to be told by a technician that to fix it would cost two or three times what the asking price is. Most people, after all is said and done, feel it is the best money they will ever spend, as the decision to hire a technician can literally save the prospective buyer hundreds if not thousands of dollars.

The second way is to purchase a reconditioned piano from a technician or from a dealer who has technicians on staff. If a technician or dealer is selling you a piano, their reputation is at stake if they sell you anything but a decent instrument. They usually come with some kind of warranty, will already have the necessary repairs done to them and will almost always include the delivery and the first tuning. These pianos are assessed by the technician in much the same way one would be assessed for the first-time buyer. In other words, no technician or dealer would buy a piano that would cost so much to fix, that it couldn't be sold.

Pianos sold by dealers are fully reconditioned, and sometimes even refinished to improve the piano's aesthetic and monetary value . The price you pay for a piano is determined directly by it's age, how much work went into it, and how much was paid for it in the first place. And an important thing to remember is that the piano will likely maintain most of its value for a very long time, should you decide to sell down the road.

#### **THE "FINAL" NOTE**

The purpose of this writing is not to simplify the process of buying a piano, but to help you prepare for this very important purchase. The scope of the brochure cannot possibly cover all possible situations as most technicians have spent years learning and perfecting their craft and have seen literally thousands of pianos, each one presenting it's own unique set of challenges.

The only way to be sure - deal with a certified piano technician!!

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