

The Piano: King of the Musical World

“If you want to make beautiful music, you must play the black and the white notes together.”
— Richard M. Nixon

OUR 37th president was referring to the importance of equality in America, but we can take it literally to mean creating harmony. In musical terms, harmony is a combination of sounds or notes considered pleasing to the ear. I cannot think of anything more harmonious than the voice of a piano.

When you think of a piano what comes to mind? Do you think of the music that emanates gloriously from this noble instrument? Or do you think of the heroes in many a Bollywood movie “tickling the ivories” at a party or at a club, while singing a song caught in a moment of joy or sorrow.

Do you think of the shining black grand piano, in all its intricate glory, as the centerpiece of a room in your home? In this day and age, pianos have become a fixture in homes all over this world for different reasons – for the joy of actually playing this

majestic masterpiece or because it is an exquisite piece of furniture that accentuates a room with elegance.

The piano is a global instrument and is used in almost every genre of music. But what is it about a piano that is so appealing that so many people who may not know a thing about playing it own one? It is estimated there are over 10 million pianos in American homes, businesses and institutions and that number keeps growing. Piano lessons are some of the most common music lessons taken. There are many people who have studied how to play at least at some time in their lives.

Admired for their grandiose beauty and exquisite craftsmanship, pianos are not by any means inexpensive. Even lower-end pianos cost hundreds of dollars. So you can imagine some of the finest of pianos run into the tens, even hundreds, of thousands of dollars. Pianos have become a status symbol; a mark

of success, affluence, sophistication, elegance, culture, education and the list goes on.

My favorite reason for owning a piano is that it opens one’s mind to endless possibilities. I had an elderly friend tell me that, although she grew up poor in the U.S., her parents made sure they had a piano at home. Even though not everyone in her household played, it was important that the opportunity be present to them at all times.

When you learn to play the simplest tune on the piano using both your hands, it can be one of the most exhilarating experiences. I started piano lessons when I was 5, and although I begrudged my practicing at times, I stuck to it.

I took lessons off and on for the next several years, but it was at about the age of 12 that I sat down at the piano every day for the next several years and continued to play, experiment and teach myself. I had already a strong background in music the-

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MAJESTIC: A grand piano gives a regal touch to any home, apart from contributing to the melody of everyday life.



GETTY IMAGES



Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny

ory from playing the violin and from a strong music program in my school. I resumed lessons again at 16 to learn correct fingerings of the notes to the keys. Since then, through my music degrees in college, I always had to take piano classes in one way or the other.

My point is that it was merely because the piano was always there in our living room that I have acquired these skills.

As a little side note, I was recently overjoyed when I was reunited with the 27-year-old Baldwin upright piano from my childhood. This piano journeyed over 2,500 miles from my parents' home in Pennsylvania all the way to Los Angeles. So I feel as if I have a member of my family back with me again. I feel like a complete musician now that I have my piano in my presence.

The piano was born in Western Europe, and many of the piano-manufacturing firms were established in London.

The British introduced the piano to India. The Indian classical instrument that is the closest to the piano is the harmonium. This is not a native Indian instru-

ment, but rather a European instrument that was imported in the 19th century.

The Indian instrument closest to it is the harmonium. It is basically a reed organ with hand pumps and is used in virtually every musical genre in Indian music with some exceptions in south Indian classical music. To play the harmonium, one hand pumps bellows while the other hand plays the melody on the keys.

A piano, on the other hand, makes its sound by having tuned strings struck by hammers. When a key is depressed, it activates a mechanism which throws the hammer at the appropriate string (or strings) and lifts the damper (a felt-topped strip of wood which, when in place on a piano string, keeps the string from vibrating) to allow the strings to vibrate freely. The hammer strikes the string, bounces off and is caught by a checking device. The string vibrates at a set pitch or frequency (different for each note).

The strings are stretched tightly across "bridges" which are mounted on the "soundboard" to

which the vibration is transferred. The sound is amplified by means of the soundboard, which is a large flat piece of wood that effectively acts as a large loud-speaker. When the key is released, the hammer falls back into place and the damper is returned to the strings to stop them vibrating.

The evolution of the piano is intriguing. One form is believed to have begun in the year 800 and the instrument is still evolving. Basically, the piano can be traced to the early man discovering that the hunting bow could produce a pitch if plucked; then to the discovery that varying the length and thickness of the strings could sound other pitches. The piano is considered a stringed as well as a percussion instrument. The first stringed instrument was the harp. The curve of the harp, providing the varied speaking length of the strings, dictated the shape of the frame of a piano, a grand piano.

The piano evolved from an instrument in the 14th and 15th centuries called the psaltery and then the dulcimer. Next came the clavichord, then the harpsi-

chord/spinet (in the 1600s) and finally to the piano forte (1700s), which was essentially the piano. Bartolomeo Cristofori is credited as the inventor of the piano.

The piano is known as the "King of Instruments" for a number of reasons, including its tonal range. The piano covers the full spectrum of any instrument in an orchestra from below the lowest note of the double bassoon to above the top note of the piccolo: the lowest of the lows and the highest of the highs.

Also, it has the ability to produce melody and accompaniment at the same time and it has a broad dynamic range, meaning it can sound very soft to very loud. It is also the largest musical instrument after the pipe organ.

So whether you are a piano amateur or virtuoso, or maybe you simply want to liven up your living room a piano is a majestic masterpiece that holds unlimited discoveries and should be treated with much respect.

Geeta Bhatnagar-Novotny, a Los Angeles-based classical musician, is a vocal soloist, instrumentalist, actor and teacher.

There are about 7,500 parts in the action, or the working section, of the piano, all playing the role of sending the hammers against the strings when keys are struck to create the note.

- There are 88 keys on a piano encompassing the notes A-G.
- There are 52 white and 36 black keys.
- There are 7 white and 5 black keys to an octave.
- There are 7 ¼ octaves on the piano.
- The average piano has about 230

strings and about 165 pounds of tension.

- The combined pull of these strings equals about 18 tons.
- Total string tension of a concert grand is 30 tons.
- Pianos range in weight from 400 to 1,000 pounds and beyond.
- There are about 50 brand names of pianos – such as: Steinway, Baldwin, Mason & Hamlin, Wurlitzer, Kimball, Yamaha, Kawai, Young Chang Bösendorfer, Chickering and others.

Intriguing Facts

- The difference between a grand and an upright or vertical piano is that the soundboard is placed differently in relation to the strings and the hammer.

- Around the 1700s, keyboards were made of ivory, bone, mother-of-pearl, porcelain, tortoiseshell, shell, boxwood, cedar or ebony. Piano makers then moved to glass and porcelain for the keys to make the piano more economical. Currently, molded plastic is wrapped around the wooden cores

of the keys to create the keyboard.

Presidential Pianos

- 17th President Andrew Johnson owned a Steinway square piano.
- 33rd President Harry S. Truman owned Steinway and Baldwin grands and a Steinway upright.
- 40th President Ronald Reagan owned a Steinway grand.
- 42nd President Bill Clinton owned a Baldwin grand.
- Presidents who do not own pianos include Gerald Ford, George Bush and George W. Bush.
- There is a Steinway grand in the White House residence.