



ian burgess-simpson™
pianos

Buyers Guide to Purchasing a Piano

Acoustic vs digital / upright vs grand



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Investing in a good piano:

There are two elements of investment in purchasing a piano.

1. The tangible financial investment of a good instrument is related to the steady increase in new piano prices over time, which then drives an increase in the prices of pre-owned pianos, however this is dependent on a piano being well maintained and one needs to be aware that because pianos have a finite life-cycle, the increase in value eventually starts to be offset by the natural aging process in pianos. This will depend on the quality of the instrument, the position of the brand in the market and the way a piano is cared for.



2. The second element of investment is less tangible, but arguably just as important. It's the way in which a good piano, fundamentally changes and improves the skill and inspiration of the pianist. Playing the piano is a demanding activity and it makes a huge difference if the instrument one plays on has a controllable and reliable mechanism and is a pleasure to play.

You can hear the difference in somebody's playing in a very short space of time when they come into the showroom and are trying good quality pianos in comparison to what they are used to. Within half an hour the sound they produce and the confidence in their playing noticeably improves.

Ian would estimate that seventy percent of the pianos assessed, serviced, tuned or rebuilt in his thirty-year career are not fit for purpose. The reasons vary and include the age of the piano, its original build quality and subsequent deterioration and the quality of source materials. The piano may be structurally sound, but its quality doesn't match the needs of the pianist or venue. This means that thousands of people are learning on

instruments that, at best, don't suit them and, at worst, produce mediocre sound.

Beginner pianists, particularly children, will associate their ability with the instrument's condition and capacity, which means the pianist will assume their ability is lacking when playing a piano incapable of producing decent sound. The worst possible scenario is for a young pianist to unduly blame themselves, feel



they aren't musical enough and question their piano playing. If piano teachers and parents are genuinely interested in fostering a love of playing in music students, a decent piano is a must. To use a sporting analogy, you wouldn't send your child onto the sports field with an antique bat or with the incorrect shoes for their chosen sport. Similarly, it's important to practice on an appropriate piano which is fit for purpose and gives the learner the best chance of success.

Acoustic or digital?

Choosing the right piano isn't easy. You've got to think about the initial financial outlay, maintenance and related costs, the potential to upgrade if/when necessary, value retention and longevity.

Acoustic pianos are strongly recommended for mid to upper level playing, especially for classical repertoire. As music becomes more complex and requires more nuanced expressiveness a good acoustic piano provides a wider tone range and more development of technique. They have a much longer life span and offer better value retention (dependent on brand, age and condition), however they do require more regular and costly maintenance than digital options.



Digital pianos

Coming from a very traditional, acoustic background, perhaps like many music teachers, we had concerns about whether digital pianos had anything worthwhile to offer or were just a cheap and maybe negative substitute for a “real” piano.

Digital pianos can never replace an acoustic piano, because the way the sound is produced and projected will always give a somewhat different quality. Also, students can't study beyond a certain level.

However, we have found over time that, in fact, *good* digital pianos have some very real benefits and their tone and touch, especially in the last few years, and have developed to a point where the pianist can do quite serious work on a digital.



Digital pianos are sometimes seen as a necessary compromise when an acoustic is not suitable, either for cost, space or privacy reasons. Yet there are also ways in which a digital piano offers things one can't get from a traditional piano.

For example:

Record function

- It's very difficult to listen to oneself while playing, and recording an acoustic piano is difficult, and expensive to do well. Kawai digital pianos have an easy to use built in record function, capturing whatever you play, perfectly and in real time. You can listen back with another push of a button. This is almost like having a teacher or audience in the room, as you can assess your playing when you listen back. The record function can also provide some moderate performance pressure which is a useful learning tool when preparing for exams or recitals.
- Being able to record offers tremendous creative stimulation, as you can improvise and listen back to your own musical expression. This keeps children and adults engaged with their natural creativity.

Privacy

- Unless one is a natural performer, many people feel self-conscious when playing or practicing if they're aware that others can hear them. On a digital piano you have two alternatives that allow you to relax and play without anxiety – listening on headphones or playing with the volume low.
- The headphone and volume control also allow a digital piano to be integrated into family spaces; practicing doesn't have to interfere with other family activities.

General musical growth

- Kawai digital pianos have several ways to support the development of one's musical knowledge. You can play music with historical tuning styles and hear the way music would have sounded when it was composed, as tuning has changed a great deal over the last 200 years. There are lesson functions that allow one to practice separate hands with the piano playing the other part. Additionally, Kawai's unique Concert Magic, available in certain models, means children can play tunes in an assisted mode that gives them an immediate experience of making music, rather than working for such a long time before they can experience playing a piece.

What makes a good ACOUSTIC piano?

There are four especially important factors to consider in choosing an acoustic piano well suited to its purpose:

1. Inherent quality

Notwithstanding the importance of cost and budget realities, the inherent design, material and manufacturing quality of a piano is a critical starting point. This will dictate how well it meets expectations even at a moderate level of use. Below a certain level, due to the complexity of pianos, they may not be adequate as a musical instrument.

2. Size

This is often misunderstood, with people assuming that size is directly related to power and the space the piano will go into. In fact, it is mostly related to the quality of the



tone, not volume. Longer strings and a bigger soundboard give a piano a richer, more complex and more pure sound. Small pianos, depending on design, may sound indistinct and have a limited tone due to the short strings.

3. Age

Age is entirely a negative factor in pianos. All pianos deteriorate with time. The mechanical ageing and wear and tear can be addressed by service or restoration work, but the soundboard, which is a structural part, steadily loses tone quality. This can start being noticeable from 10 – 15 years of age onwards. Different pianos will age differently dependent on numerous factors, but it is an absolute. Therefore, one should aim to choose the youngest piano affordable, and a new instrument is preferable. It will provide the best starting point and the best longevity as well as value retention.



4. Set up and maintenance

New pianos have a long journey from factory to their final destination, and pre-owned pianos will have been used in a variety of settings and contexts. In either case, the outcome of the piano you buy is heavily reliant of the way in which it is prepared and then installed in your space. This goes beyond just tuning, although that is part of the process.

What makes a good DIGITAL piano?



1. Mechanism and touch

The degree to which a mechanism feels like an acoustic piano is an important element of digital value. The objective is to give the pianist the most control over the tone as found in good quality acoustic pianos. This is equally important for a trained classical pianist and a child just starting lessons.

2. Tone quality and authenticity

Reproducing the authentic sound of an acoustic piano is a primary goal for good digital pianos. We often have trained and professional pianists and teachers who are surprised and impressed when they try Kawai digitals. The feedback is that they haven't experienced any digital pianos that provide such authenticity.

There are a few main contributors to this:

- **Polyphony** measures the number of notes that can sound simultaneously. This is an indicator of how complex and full the tone is in comparison to the benchmark of an acoustic piano. Examples of polyphony rating numbers are: 96 notes; 192 notes and 256 notes. The higher polyphony ratings allow for more expressiveness.
- **Sampling**, which is the way acoustic piano sounds are captured digitally, is extremely important for an authentic sound. Kawai always sample every note individually, whereas many digital pianos use notes spaced apart and extrapolate the notes in between. Kawai also use a unique proprietary process called **Harmonic Imaging**, through their entire range, to create their samples. It produces exceptional sensitivity to the way a note sounds in different types of touch from the pianist.
- **Projection of sound.** As digital pianos don't have strings and a soundboard, the design, quality and positioning of the speakers affect how well the experience of playing compares to an acoustic piano. Kawai partner with Onkyo, the leading Japanese audio company, and their digital pianos are distinguished by the speaker quality.

3. Features

- This includes functions such as adjustment of tone and touch, recording capacity, interface with other devices and the number of sounds other than piano. For most of our customers, piano sound and touch are the most important features, and Kawai focus on these elements.



The following table provides a comprehensive pros-and-cons comparison and includes some new points to note.

	Acoustic Piano	Digital Piano
Sound quality	Authentic sound with more room for musical expression.	Can sound authentic depending on the method of sampling and the quality of projection.
Privacy	Some acoustic pianos offer a practise rail to soften the sound, but there is little privacy.	Volume can be reduced, or headphones can be used to play quietly.
Tuning	Requires tuning every 6 – 12 months. One can never tune a piano too often.	Doesn't require tuning.
Maintenance	A thorough service is recommended every 5 – 7 years in addition to just tuning. Should be placed in a humidity-controlled space.	A minor service is recommended, but not essential, every 2 – 3 years.
Price	Generally, more expensive	Generally, less expensive
Longevity	Lifespan is dependent on regular servicing, but can reach beyond 100 years, although tonal quality will reduce over time, especially after 50 years.	Average lifespan is 10 years. New models are upgraded and released regularly, and parts are not as robust as acoustic pianos.
Resale value	Generally higher if well maintained.	Value decreases much faster than acoustic.
Touch sensitivity	Piano action mechanisms gives you better control of musical tones and expressions – if well maintained.	Some models lack touch-sensitivity, while others have touch-sensitive, weighted keys that mimic an acoustic piano's keys.
Portability	Heavier, requires 2 – 4 people to move depending on size of instrument	Lighter weight and usually only requires 1 – 2 people to move.
Space required	Has a slightly larger footprint for uprights and a much larger space is required for grands.	Less space required.
Power source	Not required	Required
Additional features	Cabinet colour and finish options are more varied.	Other instrument sounds, lesson functions built in, volume control and the ability to record and playback. Layering sounds is also an option.

Hybrid pianos

There is also a third option, the hybrid piano. This is a **relatively new member to the piano family**. These are pianos that combine digital and acoustic elements in one instrument, providing the best of both worlds. Kawai are the leaders in this technology, and their range of Hybrid pianos caters to a wide range of possible scenarios.

Kawai's ATX4 range combines their acoustic pianos with a full digital piano built in. You



can switch between acoustic and digital mode, with the piano being "Silent" when playing digitally with headphones. You can also record, play other instruments and have access to the digital sample base of other Kawai grands, such as their concert EX.

In addition to this, they offer the AR2 (Aures) range can also be played through the Soundboard Speaker System which uses Onkyo speaker design projected through the piano's solid spruce soundboard, providing an exceptional analogue quality of sound. Any other music can also be played through the Soundboard Speaker, transforming the piano into a complete and very high-end audio system. An acoustic piano soundboard is perhaps the best speaker possible, and Kawai have harnessed this to integrate the piano as a core part of any and all music you enjoy.





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