

So You Want To Play The Piano?

Contents:

PRELUDE	5
CHAPTER 1 Why the piano?	6
CHAPTER 2 Will I need a piano?	9
CHAPTER 3 Finding a piano teacher	14
CHAPTER 4 What qualities should I look for in a piano teacher?	16
CHAPTER 5 Other considerations	21
CHAPTER 6 Which piano method?	25
CHAPTER 7 The first lesson, progress and words of encouragement	38
CHAPTER 8 Piano basics	42
CHAPTER 9 Piano technique	53
CHAPTER 10 Piano exams	62
CHAPTER 11 Piano music	81
CHAPTER 12 Music festivals, competitions and public performance	95
CODA	97
APPENDIX	98
SUGGESTED FURTHER READING	100

Chapter 1: Why the piano?

'Neither a lofty degree of intelligence nor imagination nor both together go to the making of genius.

Love, love, love, that is the soul of genius.'

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Music is a universally popular subject. It is a language which is easily understood worldwide. Most mortals are very excited by the idea of producing beautiful sounds. Appreciating music can be an enlightening and enriching experience and it has the capacity to move a human being in a completely unique manner. Playing an instrument is a wonderful source of pleasure and fulfilment, and it can bestow a deep sense of satisfaction and joy.

The piano is the ultimate musical instrument and in many ways it competes with a complete orchestra, such is the variety and depth of sound that it produces in the hands of a skilled pianist. The piano provides all the necessary fundamentals in music: melody, harmony and rhythm. It needs no accompaniment and gives the performer total freedom in terms of solo performance.

Once proficient, the talented piano student could play for a school assembly; accompany a choir, a church congregation or singers and instrumentalists; provide background music in public venues; play keyboards in a musical theatre show or in a rock or pop group, as well as performing solo. This versatile instrument lends itself to all styles of music. Although the performing possibilities are endless, a student who reaches a reasonable standard of playing should be able to accompany singers with ease and play duets (two pianists playing together at one piano). As soon as the basics have been grasped, they are easily transferrable to other keyboard instruments such as the organ, clavichord, harpsichord, spinet, celeste, and electronic or digital keyboard. The ability to play the piano really does provide an excellent foundation for music study.

The piano is not easy to play but it is possible to achieve results quite swiftly. One of the many reasons it's considered challenging is because two lines of music must be negotiated at the same time: one for the right hand and the other for the left. This doesn't happen on many other instruments; a single line of music suffices on the majority of orchestral instruments, for example. However, the piano possesses the ability to generate instant sounds (or pitches) which are produced simply by depressing the keys, so the sonorities are coherent from the beginning. Therefore, most students are able to make music (to some degree) right from the first lesson and it's also possible to easily transfer these skills, such as learning musical notation and physical coordination, to other instruments. Many musical instruments require months of practice in order to produce sounds resembling music (especially string, brass and wind instruments).

The piano is undoubtedly the instrument of choice for private music lessons. Thousands of children and adults start learning each year. One of the most popular music examination boards in the world is the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (also known as ABRSM), which was founded in England in 1889.

In 2013, ABRSM delivered over 650,000 graded music exams worldwide in around 90 countries and 249,315 of these were piano entries. There are many music exam boards around the world, so this figure will only represent a fraction of the number of students who were actually learning the piano that year.¹

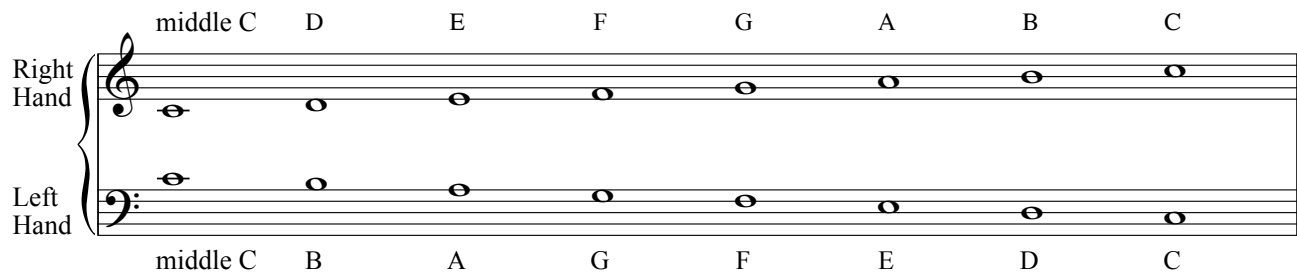
How do I know if my child wants to play the piano?

Adults who want to play the piano will clearly have their reasons for doing so, whether that be a general desire to improve their mental agility, or perhaps a wish to take it up again after having learned as children. It should be stressed that it is never too late to learn to play and it is an empowering pastime. Children, however, are a different matter. A common question posed by parents is, 'How can I tell if my child is really serious about wanting piano lessons?'

¹ Statistics printed with permission from ABRSM

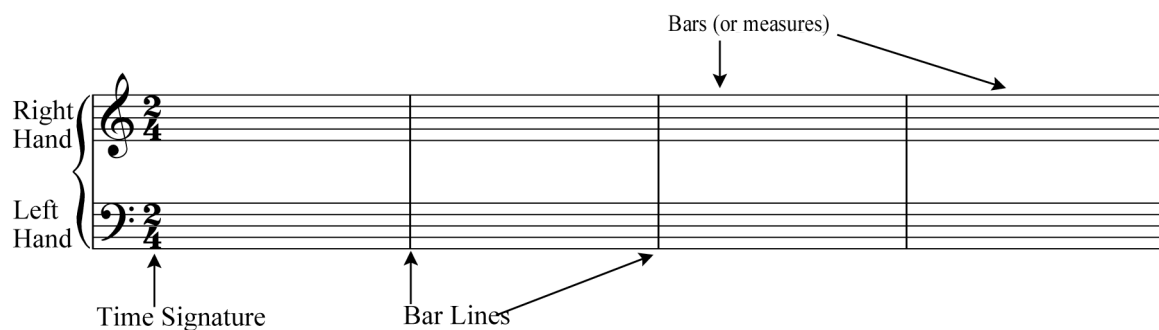
The general piano music layout is normally illustrated; showing the five-line music background (called the staff) where all the notes are placed. The top line shows music played by the right hand (higher pitched sounds), and the bottom, music played by the left hand (lower pitched sounds); see Ex. 4. It's worth noting that middle C (the first note on Ex. 4) is the same key in the right and left hand.

Ex. 4



This is followed by an explanation of the function of bars and bar lines (see Ex. 5). The time signature (two numbers which appear at the beginning of a piece of music) denotes how many beats will be in every bar (bars run throughout a piece of music). There are two beats to each bar in Ex. 5 (the top number tells us this), with bar lines separating every bar.

Ex. 5



Piano method books often vary after this; some go into detail about hand and finger positions and others start explaining rhythm and pulse. Most methods stress the importance of middle C (see Ex. 4) as a starting point in terms of finding the notes (but some use an intervallic approach, and others a mixture of both methods, which will be discussed in Chapter 8). This information is all crucial and should be emphasised right from the beginning as it does help the beginner to find their way around the keyboard. Pupils will be able to assimilate this material quickly, but it is all much easier to do when guided by a teacher who will make sure you understand each point before going on to learn the next one. If you haven't understood, don't worry; it is the job of the teacher to sit there with you until the penny drops. After all, that's what they are being paid to do, so don't be afraid to ask for more help if you need it.

Piano methods can vary considerably. Those geared towards children will have pictures, cartoon characters and fun features whereas those intended for adults and teenagers will concentrate on serious, swifter learning. Children definitely need a 'fun' approach because their concentration spans are very much shorter than those of adults, and they love pictures of elves, cats and dogs, robots, dinosaurs or the 'Gruffalo' to keep them interested.

In the last 20 years there has been an influx of piano books on the market and many of them are excellent and informative. Ones to be wary of are those which do not teach or show the basics from the beginning. Here are a few common problems, and some of these stem from inadequate piano books.

Remember, bad habits are very difficult to eradicate!