

## Acoustic versus Digital Piano FAQs (or the Plight of the Poor Piano)

by Julie Cleveland

### Do we need an acoustic piano for lessons?

Technically, no. You can use a digital piano. A digital piano has 88 weighted keys and pedals. Many teachers don't care if you have a digital or a piano. I am not one of those teachers. I teach piano, not digital keyboard. So you need a "real" or acoustic piano. Why? Because when you sign up to learn to play the piano, or sign up your child, you're not studying digital keyboard, or taking digital keyboard lessons, you are signing up for *piano* lessons. If you are going to invest hundreds—thousands—of dollars over the long haul for your child to become a pianist (if he or she practices!), then make the investment sound and invest in the piano from the get go (as there is "relearning" for students who have been on digitals, or less, for years).

### Is an acoustic piano better?

Yes. There is no comparison. Nothing replaces the feel and sound and, of course, the emotional experience of playing a real piano. The wood and strings and metal of the piano create vibrations that go up into your body as you play. You cannot get this experience on an electronic instrument. (A violinist doesn't learn to play on an electronic violin.) When learning on a digital piano, the emotional reaction with the instrument is not the same. Sometimes it's lacking. Oftentimes students on digitals too long lose interest. That's because they are not having an *emotional*, musical experience with their instrument. Professionals use digital pianos because they have to, for recording, for gigs, etc. I don't know too many pianists who go into a room and choose the digital over the piano to play on.

A wonderful video to watch is [Seymour Bernstein's You and the Piano](#), in which he, a concert pianist, describes the piano beautifully.

### We live an apartment/condo/house and don't have room for a real piano.

The truth is that the difference in size (cubic space) between an acoustic upright piano and a digital keyboard is only in *inches*. The measurements below include depth and width. (Height is moot, unless you have wainscoting or shelving all the way around your house that comes way, way out from the wall, or live in an apartment or condo with 6-foot ceilings.)

An upright acoustic piano measures about **60 inches long**.

A digital piano measures about **54 inches long**.

An upright acoustic piano measures about **46 inches deep**, which includes the space of the bench from the piano when seated to play.

A digital piano measures about **43 inches deep**, which includes the space of the bench from the piano when seated to play.

## **We can't afford a real piano.**

If your child takes to lessons and is excited and learning you have to be able to afford it. Why? Because if you're laying out hundreds—thousands—of dollars for the piano education of your child over years, then you must also invest in a piano. It would be foolhardy not to.

Sometimes, actually, real pianos are *less* than higher-end digital pianos (which are the only ones you would want to purchase anyway). Craigslist always has acoustic pianos for sale, no matter where you live on Planet Earth (as does eBay). Some are great, some are ok, some are horrible. It's exactly like buying a used car. *Bring a piano technician with you to assess the piano.* I've italicized this sentence because it is so important and so often folks skip this step; just like buying a used car, you need a pro to look under the lid and tell you whether it's worth the money. (I can recommend two excellent techs that I work with).

Buy Larry Fine's The Piano Book, or visit his website, to help you learn about new and used pianos. Visit piano stores and play different brands (I can recommend shops). Often stores will let you rent a piano by the month, for a low cost (Williams Piano Shop in Brookline). And recruit me to help you. Why? I will always help someone in need of a real piano. Plus I love to shop! Hunter-gatherer instinct.

## **Pros and cons – acoustic versus digital pianos:**

### ***Acoustic Piano***

Needs to be tuned.  
Is a real piano.

### ***Digital Piano***

Never needs tuning.  
Is not a real piano.

## **Why are you so against digital pianos?**

It's not that I am *against* them, it's that I am *for* acoustic pianos. Having played a real piano since the late 1960s, and many various keyboards and digital pianos since the 1980s, I am in a position to have an opinion about it. I speak from experience. I don't own any stock in a piano company, get kickbacks from piano dealers or shops, and I am not anti-technology. I have been accused of being old-fashioned on the subject. But if I, a pianist for over 45 years, and a piano teacher for nearly 30, don't stick up for real pianos, who will?

*All electronic keyboards are just toys.—Keith Jarrett*

Tokyo '84 concert: Over the Rainbow. (He moves around a lot, but, well, he's Keith Jarrett.)

Click [this link](#), close your eyes, breathe, and listen. You won't regret it.  
The piano.