

Good Piano, Best Piano, the best is for Children

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A grand piano from the start, for its tone and touch, is the best piano, the true piano for children. Children will be interested in making music at a wonderful instrument, which has beautiful sound and feel. Why would anyone be interested in spending study time on poor instruments? (It's not logical to give children an inferior instrument to start with to see if they're interested in music, a common erroneous idea). The need for daily home study at a superior instrument is obvious.

If you want your child to eat salad, you offer the most beautiful, colorful, fresh, attractive ingredients. To be drawn to practice, children need to be entranced by the instrument's richly beautiful resonance, tone quality, wide dynamic range, sensitive, quality touch, expressiveness... the feeling of it.

Pianist teachers need to make a pre-lesson student home visit to see + play the piano. To know if the piano is good. If the piano + bench are in the right place. To advise to get a good instrument. To explain the need to study at home at good grand piano from the start, for its tone and touch.

Children are naturally drawn to beauty, and are sensitive to subtle differences. Let them work with subtleties of beauty of tone from the beginning, so they'll develop sensitive playing, and versatility. They'll naturally be inspired to BE at such an instrument, and will be inspired AT the instrument. They'll be working as artists from the start. Give instruments with beautiful resonance of sound, with wonderful, even touch with the right feeling of resistance, with the grand piano's feeling of the escapement, "the bump", which gives an action which is not too stiff, and not too loose, but "just right" for good control of the speed of the key, for natural ease of healthy technique. For comfort of the body

It's mistaken thinking to give children an inferior instrument as a trial to assess their interest in music; it's an erroneous idea, unfortunately common. Children will be interested in making music at a wonderful instrument, which has beautiful sound and feel.

Why would anyone be interested to spend study time on a poor instrument? Music practice is challenging, long-term, + often difficult even on the best instruments. It's not like learning to tie your shoes, which once learned stays the same. In music practice our goals keep getting higher. The more we can do, the farther we can see there IS to do.

We need our instruments to be wonderful partners in our music making, the same as dancers need wonderful partners. The instrument needs to be physically and tonally responsive on every level, to be a conduit for our musical expression.

Children need the BEST food, and the BEST instruments.

The piano first of all needs to have a lovely, captivating sound with lasting, rich resonance. This lasting sound is what our feelings ride along on. It's the voice of the instrument which captures our feelings and our attention. Its voice becomes our own voice. The piano needs to be able to produce singing tone, "living tone". Plus, the piano needs to be capable of sensitive and varied expression with that basic tone.

The children need to be able to produce the same quality ringing tone and coax the same sensitivity out of their home pianos as their lesson pianos.

If the home piano requires pounding to get sound, children will become stiff and tense trying to play it. They'll develop harmful habits. If the home piano can produce only three different amounts of sound on a single note, children won't be able to create expressive musical lines. Their musicianship potential will be limited. If a family's piano has poor tone, dull tone, low resonance, dead tone, and/or poor range of tone, or poor action, now is the time, BEFORE LESSONS BEGIN, to change the piano. Tell them to play the best concert grands in the store to learn what it's like. One key at a time, see how many levels of sound they can

get from one key . . . Hear the resonance last from one note. In each register. Feel the bump on each key. Notice the differences . . .

Then ask themselves which instruments would attract them to practice every day. Ask themselves if the piano they have at home is an enticing partner.

Advise how to get a good tone instrument with perfect even action. This allows children to be “relaxed” where they need to relax, and to be balanced of spine so they CAN relax their shoulders, elbows, forehead, eyelids, tongue, jaw, so they can have a clear mind, open ears, an open awareness to develop a natural technique. This is the path to good tone and musical playing.

Give them an instrument which has 10 to 20 levels of lovely sound per key, and encourage families to experiment creatively to learn to use the instrument artistically. Even the best teaching cannot give children good playing and listening habits if the piano at home doesn't allow artistic choices at a high level. Dr. Suzuki always said “Ability grows at home”, and habits are formed at home seven days a week. **ONLY A HEALTHY HOME INSTRUMENT CAN FOSTER A HEALTHY MUSICIAN.**

If parents live apart, each home needs a good piano for children's daily practice, and each home needs home visits from the teacher. Parents need also to establish a regular piano tuning and maintenance schedule for their instruments.

Once families have a good piano, you need to supervise where they put it. This makes a difference. A home visit again will let you see the piano moved to an inviting spot conducive to frequent practice, with space for the bench to be placed correctly on a uniformly flat surface, far enough from the keyboard for an adult's well-balanced sitting-playing. (You'd be amazed at the stories I could tell about kids' weird posture resultant from wrong benches + wrong placement).

Pianists need to teach parents and children how to check their seating so they can sit at the right height at their home piano. We're at the right height when the keyboard is UNDER our hands = hand-wrist-arm, with wrist + forearms parallel to the floor. To check, sit with legs straight down from the knees- legs vertical, with heels down (not behind) and feet flat, with the back stretched straight up, shoulders relaxed, arms down. Raise arms parallel to the floor. The keyboard should be UNDER the fingers, with arms, wrist and hands still horizontal, in a straight line. If the keyboard is higher than that, we raise the seat.

The seat needs to be flat, firm, and solid. We can pile up carpet samples to achieve the right seat height. (Not pillows which are not solid, firm or flat enough; too soft). The bottom of the elbow should be about level with the top of the keys, or a bit higher. The wrist + forearm are parallel to the floor, and above the keys, with extended fingers-hand-wrist-arm in alignment.

For deciding the distance of the piano bench from the piano, teach “Knees under keys”, “Arms can reach in”.

For deciding on height of bench: “First fix your SEAT, then fix your feet.” Adjust the seat first.

After first checking and correcting the seat height, then check the feet. Feet flat, legs vertical straight down. Pianists' feet should reach the floor and be flat, with heels down. Pianists should be able to stand up from where their feet press (not loosely dangling). If feet don't reach the floor, make a higher “floor” surface. A wide footstool or a pile of carpet samples wider than our hips' width can create a flat, firm, solid floor to support the flat feet. This is the prerequisite for the back to be balanced straight up over the hips. Tape the carpet samples together if needed.

Each body is a bit different in thickness, wideness, proportions... This affects how it feels to sit at the piano. So ultimately, based on feeling, we make our own unique choices in exact height of our seat + its distance from the keys. I tend to sit at the edge of the bench, feet flat, for my back to balance straight up easily. When I use a pedal, foot forward, I may put the other foot behind, to keep balance. I tend to sit on the higher side.

When one hand is playing, put the other hand on the other hip. This helps the back stay straight up, with shoulder loose. (The knee is only for viewing; it's a bad handle. Putting hands on knees collapses the back and tenses the shoulders). Put hands on hips, (not on knees).

Hands on hips, measure the width of hips. Knees, heels + toes should be same distance apart as the hips. This balances the back over the hips. Make foot support, either footstool or carpet samples, even wider. Then the feet can be far enough apart to let the back balance straight up. Stand up, Sit down. Feet flat.

The backs of the heels are down flat. They are vertically under the back of the knees. "Back of heels under back of knees". "Heels down." Below the knee, the legs are vertical. Feet are parallel to each other, with toes, heels and knees same distance apart as hips and shoulders. "Hips, knees, feet: same distance apart." Feet placed thus balance the back vertically. (If feet are wrong, the back falls down. Back collapses if feet are behind or in front).

We need the feet to be consciously placed, and feet able to press down, for the back to naturally balance and be straight up, to "Be a Tree". Then the shoulders can be soft so the arms can release and deliver their weight through the elbow, wrist, hand and fingers to the key to the hammer to the string to create the resonant sound of vibration of strings + soundboard + air so the physics will be right for best expression through tone.

You may need a separate pile of carpet samples under each foot so the feet can be far enough apart. "Back of heels under back of knees", "Heels under knees". Push heels into floor to feel lower back's alignment. If the lower parts of the legs are vertical over flat feet, then the back can stay vertical. This frees the shoulders-arms-elbows-hands-fingers to move naturally, and to freely drop weight into the keys for natural good tone production.

(If the feet and back are unstable, there's a feeling of needing to "hold on" or "hang on for dear life" to the piano, from the insecurity of poor seating. This leads to tension, poor technique and poor tone). Vertical lower legs-vertical back-free arms-balanced hands. Arm weight can transfer to keys. Feet, back, shoulders-arms-wrist-hand-fingers are all aligned, in balance. Shoulders feel free, dropped, movable around their circle.

When sitting is good, stretch up: "Be a tree". Keeping heels down and feet flat, slowly breathe in, opening the chest and shoulders, and reach up with hands toward the sky to stretch the spine up, straight up. "Be a tree; be a tall tree". "The wind blows, the tree trunk [the back] stays straight". Wait. "The branches come down, the tree trunk stays straight". Then slowly breathe out and, letting the back stay straight, slowly let arms down to the sides, keeping open the chest and shoulders, letting shoulders drop. Breathe in slowly while arms go up; breathe out slowly coming down. "Go up slowly . . . come down fast". "Go up fast . . . come down slowly". "Tree trunk [Back] always stays straight."

This attention to breathing helps clear the attention. This attention to sitting needs to be toward to ALL sitting - at home as well as at lesson, in any chair in any place. Good body use needs to be practiced always (also outside of music practice). Let's build all good habits. Adjust seat and feet at the dinner table; scrutinize all seating, including at school desks. ESPECIALLY at the computer, check seat and feet. Especially at the computer watch how you use your feet, neck, back, shoulders, elbows, arms, wrists, hands and fingers.

"Let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen" - Alexander Technique. Use free, in-the-air healthy rotation of arm-hand-finger (avoid wrist or arm rests: bad - they cut off the arm weight from the finger). Computer keyboard should elicit the same body use as piano keyboard; we have the same body! Health is from proper use. (Pain + tension from "overuse" are from poor use in poor alignment). If we're in alignment, and using our body within the laws of nature, of physics, we can practice long + still feel good.

As children grow, piano teachers need to check again and again on kids' lesson and home seating. Even

though parents are taught how to do the seating, teachers still need to check. Until you go see for yourself, you never know what random factors can distort the setup! Perhaps a photo or video can replace a home visit if needed. Sometimes seating is difficult for small children because they're so short. In order for their arms and hands to be over the keys, they need to sit so high that their knees jam into the bottom of the keyboard. We adjust the place for the feet somehow to make them comfortable, to still sit well.

Sometimes instead of sitting, children can stand to play if, when they stand, with released shoulders, their elbows are about the level of the key tops. At one period in their lives, they're the right height to stand at the piano. Let them have this pleasure.

Let them stand on carpet squares to be high enough, or a stack under each foot. Or even carpet squares all along the floor under the 88 keys so they can play the entire keyboard. When children stand at the piano, their feet, legs and back are in proper alignment. Then, when they sit again, they can remember the feeling of neck, back, + lower legs vertical, and reproduce the alignment. This standing practice gives comfortable body balance over flat feet, with free arms so needed for piano tone production.

Show them how to stand at the piano, with forearms parallel to the floor, and above the keys, with bottom of the elbow level with the top of the keys. The wrists, hands, and fingers are always over the keyboard (not hanging down and off). The wrist is a straight connecting bridge between hand and arm. When children grow too tall to have arms level while standing, they'll return to only sitting practice.

Sometimes adults with very long upper arms have elbows that come so low that, to have the keyboard under their hands and the bottom of their elbow level with the key tops, they have to sit so high that their legs jam into the piano keyboard's underside, just like the little kids. What to do? Raise the whole piano: put casters under each piano leg.

At every sitting, always take time and effort to adjust the height of the bench/carpet squares at the piano, and then be sure of a flat "floor". Children can grow overnight. Sometimes the torso length grows but not the upper arm's. Then their head may be way higher but also the bottom of elbow is now too high, way above the keys. Then they may have to sit lower than they used to, so the bottom of the elbow can be closer to the key level. Sometimes a different kind of growth leaves upper arms longer from the shoulder to the elbow, so elbow is too low. Then they have to sit higher than they used to, even though they've grown, so the elbow won't be lower than the keys. We have to check the seating everyday so their arms are level over the keys. Our feet right for sitting right allow us to play freely and easily in comfort. We play piano forever, feel good forever; we enjoy the sound!