

Buying a Piano or Keyboard

by
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Piano or Keyboard – What’s the Difference?

The first question is whether to buy an acoustic piano or an electronic or digital keyboard. A good acoustic piano, in most ways, is the best instrument to learn on. The *feel* of a real piano cannot be fully duplicated on any digital replica. You can actually feel the vibrations of the strings in your hands and body as you play, and the sound you get back is more alive than on digital versions.

There are, however, many drawbacks to acoustic pianos. First, getting a good piano can be expensive. A good used upright can be \$1500 and up, a good new piano, \$4000 and up.

Pianos only make one type of sound, albeit a very expressive one. If you are interested in working with all different types of sounds, you will want an instrument more like a synthesizer.

Pianos are relatively big and take up more space than their digital counterparts. They need to be tuned regularly, and they are loud – sometimes causing problems with neighbors, especially late at night.

So, if you can afford it, have the space, and don’t think you will have problems with neighbors, get a real acoustic piano – the best one you can afford. If you want to buy a new or used acoustic piano, get *The Piano Book* by Larry Fine. It will give you all the information you need to make an intelligent purchase. There are also several websites with information on buying a piano. If you’ve decided that an acoustic piano is not for you, read on...

Which Keyboard to Buy?

There are literally hundreds of keyboards on the market at prices ranging from \$100-\$5000. What are the differences?

Where's the Action?

There are two main things to consider here: the feel (“action”) of the keyboard and the types and amount of sounds. There are three types of keyboard action: **weighted**, **semi-weighted** and **unweighted**.

A **weighted action**, also called **hammer-action**, has a mechanism similar to a real piano, with moving parts like a real piano. It offers good resistance for the fingers so they can build strength, and allows the player to play a broad range of dynamics. It is similar to the feel of a real piano, and students who learn on weighted keyboards can make the transition to playing a real piano with no trouble.

A **semi-weighted action** works with a spring resistance rather than a mechanism of moving parts. It offers some resistance for finger strength, but less like the feel of an acoustic piano.

An **unweighted action** (or synth action) also works with springs and offers even less resistance. It is the least desirable on an instrument for learning.

How Many Keys?

Besides the action, keyboards come in different sizes according to the number of keys. The main three sizes are **88 keys**, **76 keys**, and **60 keys**, although some synths and keyboards actually have less than 60 keys.

88 keys are the same as an acoustic piano, and is the best choice. 76 keys will work for most kinds of music, but at some point you may run out of notes. 60 keys is least desirable, but can still be useable for beginners, lead playing or comping.

Even if you get a 60-note, unweighted keyboard, make sure it is **velocity-sensitive**, which means it will respond to how hard you hit the keys and play dynamics (loud and soft).

If you are interested in using other sounds besides piano, it is important that your keyboard has a **pitch wheel and mod wheel**. Many digital pianos *do not* have these. These are very important when using non-piano sounds to make them more realistic and expressive. **Aftertouch** is another feature that allows you to change the quality of sounds by holding the keys down and pressing them into the keybed. This feature is nice, but not essential.

Make sure you get a keyboard that will take a **sustain-pedal**, and you may as well buy the sustain pedal along with the keyboard. Get a heavy-duty, piano-style pedal, not the square switch type.

Digital Piano V.S. Synthesizer

Some keyboards are called digital pianos and meant to replace acoustic pianos. These instruments have mostly piano sounds, with perhaps a few others like organs, strings, etc. These keyboards are not true **synthesizers** – instruments that are programmable, allowing you to create and change the sounds. Synthesizers usually come with hundreds or even thousands of **preset** sounds.

Other keyboards are true synthesizers as well as being digital pianos. These are more versatile in a studio setting as there is a huge array of sounds available, and can act as an entire orchestra in a studio recording. Some keyboards are full **workstations**, which mean that they have onboard **sequencers** (recording software) that will allow the keyboard to function as a stand-alone recording studio. The onboard sequencer is less important if you have a computer, which, with the appropriate software, will be more powerful, versatile, and easier to use.

Remember, whatever keyboard you buy, it is not the end-all of your decision. You can always add other **synth modules** later, which will provide you with other sounds. You can, in fact, add on **virtual synths or virtual samplers** which are comprised of software which resides in your computer. Some synthesizers have card slots that allow you to add more sounds with **sound cards**. Most keyboard pros have many synths and modules as part of their setup. One keyboard cannot always do everything you'll need in a studio.

Amplification

While some keyboards have built-in speakers, many pro keyboards do not, allowing the owner to decide how to amplify the instrument. The easiest way is to plug in a pair of headphones, which is great for late-night playing. Head phones can fatigue the ears, however, and it is best to have a way of using loudspeakers as well. You can use your home stereo system to do this, provided it is in the same place as the keyboard. Another option is to buy an amp and speakers specifically meant for home studios, or speakers with built-in amplifiers, called powered speakers. These come in all different price ranges. In general, the more you pay, the better the sound quality.

Keyboard stand and seat

Don't forget about buying a good stand and seat. Do not put the keyboard on a desk – it will be too high. A stand should be adjustable, to make sure you get the height that is right. An "A-Frame" type stand is very versatile, as you can always add to it for other music peripherals like more keyboards, mixers, speakers, etc. Also, get a piano bench or a good office chair with back support and adjustable height.