

## **UPRIGHT PIANO BUYING QUESTIONS**

These are the questions I ask before I take the time to examine a piano for sale. I pass on 98% of all pianos that are offered to me, 70% of which are “free”. Why would I pass on a “free” piano? Because it would require too much money to handle and restore when compared to its market value. I have also paid thousands of dollars for pianos that need total restoration. Why? Because these pianos are well worth it. This tutorial will give you the right questions, and better yet – What the answers mean to you in dollars and cents.

### ***1. What is the brand name on the piano?***

The name brand of the piano can be found on the fallboard (the wooden cabinetry on top of the keys-the first letter is usually directly over the middle c note) If it is not there, open the lid and you will usually find it on the top right corner of the Metal plate. If it is not there either, it is a “no name” meaning it was probably a starter piano to begin with. If the name is not over the keys, this is also an indication that it may have been refinished at one time, or it has been painted over.

The name brand tells us a lot, as it will determine how well the piano was manufactured to begin

with, in general. However, just like General Motors makes a Corvette and a Geo Metro, many piano companies had their High and Low end models.

The name of the piano also has to be combined with the age in order to attempt to determine its quality and origin of manufacture. For example, a Weber made in 1920 is a much different piano than a Weber made in 1980, as a 1920 Weber was an American Company, but in 1980 Weber was made in Korea.

Good Names (list by no means complete):

Steinway

Mason and Hamlin

Boosendorfer

Bechstein

Sauter

Baldwin

Chickering

Knabe

Sohmer

Weber

Yamaha

Kawai

Other less known names, but good pianos (by no means complete):

Chas Steiff

Ivers and Pond

Krakauer

Behning

Acrosonic (made by Baldwin)

The Pierce Piano Atlas is about an inch thick with only names and serial numbers of pianos. It would be impossible for me to list everything here, which is why I would like to see your findings personally.

***2. How tall is the upright piano from the floor to the top?***

36" or so – Probably a Spinet piano.

42"-44" – Console

44"-49" Studio Upright

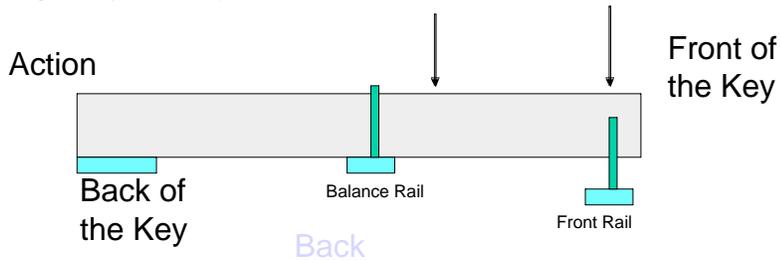
over 49" – full size upright

Note: The difference between a spinet and a console is that the spinet has a "drop action". When you open the top and look inside the piano, if the hammers (felts that strike the string when you depress the key) are on the same level or lower than the keys themselves, it is a spinet. If the Hammers are 4 – 6 inches above the level of the keys it is probably a console.

# The Difference Between a Spinet and a Console

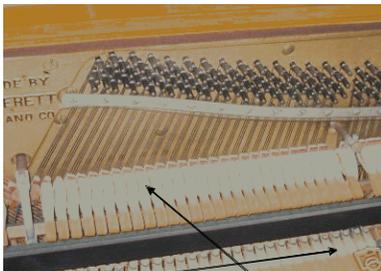
- The Console, or Direct Blow action is better, because the feel of the key is more consistent than that of a Spinet. Below is a rough diagram of a key, with the blue squares representing the key bed felts, and the green posts representing the balance and front rail pins that hold the key in place. When you play the piano, some of your fingers are positioned toward the back of the key, closer to the balance rail and some toward the front. (see arrows) On a Spinet or Drop Action, it is much harder to depress a key when your finger is closer to the balance rail, than when your finger is depressing the front of the key, due to the geometry of the Drop Action.

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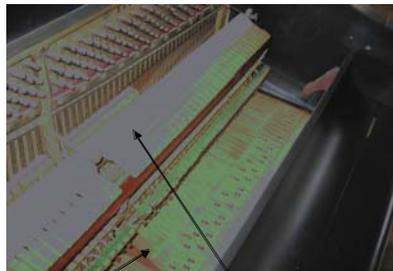
# The Difference Between a Spinet and a Console

Spinet



The Keys on a Spinet piano are near or above the level of the hammers. Most of the action parts sit below the level of the keys. This is called a "Drop Action"

Console



The Keys on a Console Piano are well below the hammers. All the action parts are above the keys. This is called a "Direct Blow" action.

[Next](#)

If it is a tall full size upright, chances are it is 60-100+ years old.

Spinets and consoles are generally 60 years old or less.

Studio Uprights can be just about any age, as they have been in production for a long time – the oldest I've seen was from 1860, and are still in production today.

Rule of thumb:

The taller the piano, the longer the strings, the larger the soundboard, the bigger and better the sound.

Exceptions to this rule:

Age, Condition, Name Brand, Quality of manufacture. For example, a Baldwin Acrosonic Spinett in great interior condition from 1960 will sound better than a Full Size Steinway Upright from 1896, if the Steinway is in unplayable and un tunable condition, although the Steinway is a much better piano. Both may sell for \$950 in as is condition. The Baldwin will need a tuning at \$135.00, and the Steinway will need complete restoration at \$7,000.00-\$12,000.00.

### ***3. How old is the piano?***

This will give us some insight to its condition. As a rule of thumb, pianos are like people. A 20 year old piano, is like a 20 year old person. Provided it had no defects at the time of manufacture, and

has been treated with loving care, and has not experienced a flood or a fire, it should be in excellent condition.

I always get a chuckle out of the phrase I see in so many ads- "This piano is in GREAT SHAPE for being 95 years old". Think about Grandpa at 95. If he is in the best shape possible, he is still 95. I have a dear friend of the family who is 79 years old. He participates in the Senior Olympics, and destroys everyone in his age group. No one comes close. He also does house painting, and did my house last year. Although he is in "better shape" than I am at 49, I still wouldn't want to trade spinal columns or internal organs with him. You get the picture...

***a. Do you have the serial number?***

Most people don't know how old their piano is. If the name is listed in the Piano Atlas, and the serial # can be located, we can find out how old it is.

The serial # is generally found on the metal plate that holds the strings inside the piano, either on the top treble corner, or in between the bass and tenor sections of the strings near the tuning pins. Other places would be on the very top of the piano under the lid, or on the back of the piano either on the top bass or top treble corner.

***b. Did you buy it used?***

***c. How long have you owned it?***

If they don't have the name or serial #, some additional probing is required. Sometimes the only way to get a clue is asking about the history as they know it.

#### ***4. Where has the piano been stored? Living Room? Basement? Garage? Porch?***

Yes, Porch. Not enclosed. I have even had people call me, telling me the piano was on the lawn for 6 months, asking me what it was worth. What do you think I told them? "But we covered it with a plastic tarp!" Yikes!

Humidity levels are one of the most important factors to the longevity of any musical instrument, especially a piano. Wood, felt and leather are greatly affected by high or low humidity, and vast swings therein. Older pianos were put together with hide glue- made from hides and hooves of animals – most of the time horses. It is amazing how long this glue has held, but it is very water soluble, and in a high humidity environment will break down and loose the bond.

If the piano has a damp chaser system in it, with a humidifier and dehumidifier, this system has kept it at 42% humidity consistently, which is the best case scenario for any piano.

The worst place a piano can be stored in a house is on an outside wall against the heater and the window. Chances are this piano will have gaping cracks in the soundboard.

Conversely, the best place is on an inside wall away from the heater.

A note about cracked soundboards.

Someone, probably new piano sales people, have spread the rumor quite effectively that a cracked soundboard means the piano is no good. Nothing can be farther from the truth. A cracked soundboard can be repaired, many times without rebuilding the whole piano, at a very reasonable cost. Many soundboard cracks are irrelevant, as they do not affect the sound of the piano unless the soundboard has come loose from the ribs. The ribs run diagonal (on most pianos) on the soundboard to hold its crown. As long as these ribs are tightly glued to the soundboard, the crack is meaningless. A cracked PLATE is a different story. The Plate holds most of the tension on the piano, and once it cracks there are few who can repair it properly, and it is a risky proposition at best. A cracked Pinblock (this holds the tuning pins tight) can be replaced as well.

For more information on these components

[click here](#)

***5. When was it last tuned? One year? Two? Over 5? Over 10?***

If the answer is over 2 years, chances are the piano needs what we call a pitch raise, or pitch

correction. Even if a piano has not been played, humidity changes will drop the pitch of the tuning, very often turning your A into an A flat. You can expect to pay for 2 tunings instead of one, after you buy it and have it delivered. Generally the fee for this service ranges from \$200.00-\$270.00 and may also indicate that there are other components of the piano that need attention- The action, for example has also swelled and contracted with humidity changes. It is made primarily of wood, felt, leather – all of which wear out and need attention. If the action is “clicking” meaning when you play it sounds like an old fashioned typewriter, this means the action needs to be tightened. If you continue to play the piano in this condition, you will damage various parts that will be much more costly to replace than to simply tighten. For a bit more information on the action, [click here](#) Generally, to recondition and regulate an action for an upright piano is about \$400 for a young piano (30-50 years old) that needs it, up to \$2500 for a much older action (70+ years old). When an action creeps over 70, chances are the best restoration is to replace the parts.

Another thing to ask is who did the tuning last, and what did she or he say about the piano. If you can, acquiring the phone number of the last tuner could shed vast amounts of light on the subject. If there is any indication that the piano will not hold concert pitch (A=440) you must become very

suspect. One of the most costly and common repairs is pin block replacement. The first sign that you need a new pin block is when the tuning won't hold, or there are individual notes that are WAY out of tune – it sounds like you are pressing on two notes together instead of just one – you have to be realistic and understand that the piano probably needs to be rebuilt. This runs from \$3300-\$5500, depending on the individual piano. Most upright pianos are not worth this much restoration from a monetary standpoint.

***6. Has the piano had any major work? When was it done? By whom?***

If the piano has been “Restrung”, this means it has the old pin block. I just sold a restrung Baby Grand for \$15.61 on e bay. The pin block was falling apart, but the strings looked shiny and new. (it was purchased for parts, and all its deficiencies were explained in great detail before the purchase)

If the piano is supposedly rebuilt, be sure to ask if the pin block was replaced.

If the receipt is still available from the work performed, ask for a copy and go over it with me. We can then determine if everything sounds correct.

If the receipt is not available, see if you can find out what was paid for the work performed. If it is too cheap, it would be an indication that the perceived rebuilding was a reconditioning. As an

aside, Piano restoration takes a certain amount of time to do things correctly. Unless the restoration shop is in China where the income per capita in one area is \$8,200.00 per year or less, there is no possible way a good restoration is going to be under a certain price.

Sometimes, due to a misinterpretation, customers will say that everything was replaced and it was all rebuilt. They are honest, and honestly think that is what was done, when many times the piano was reconditioned. This means the old parts are still on the piano, and they were repaired to play as good as possible. For many pianos, this is fine. For some pianos this is a disaster – for example – I have a Steinway Upright from 1896. A customer purchased this piano for \$1500.00 from a “dealer” who shall remain nameless. The action was “working” and I use that term loosely – someone had made it work but the parts are shot. It needs all new action parts. Now, is it worth doing? Of course it is – but if all you have is \$1500 to spend, that’s not a good piano for you. To replace ALL the action parts is about \$5,000.00, and it needs to be rebuilt with a new pinblock (Add \$4200). Considering a new Steinway upright is \$23,000 this is a GREAT DEAL. I took the Steinway in on trade and got her a much younger piano in excellent condition, which is what she needed in the first place.

### ***7. Do all the keys work?***

If the piano is 20 years old or less, any keys that don't function properly can probably be repaired at the time of tuning for very little or nothing at all extra from the tuning price.

If the piano is 30-40 years old, it may need some light reconditioning and regulation – somewhere in the \$200-\$600 range. You would simply be catching up with some maintenance, or a piano this age may not need anything more than minor repairs at the time of tuning.

40 – 60 years old holds a much greater chance of the reconditioning pricing above, possibly a bit more.

70+ years old may need as much as \$1400-\$2200 in reconditioning and felt replacement, plus up to \$2600 additional for all new parts. I know you don't want to hear that, but that's the story, unless it has been worked on recently and or well maintained through the years. With this age piano, always keep "Grandpa" in mind.

***8. Describe the furniture. Style, Color, condition.  
Does it come with a bench?***

Ornate carved pianos are more valuable because they are novelties and generally more desirable. This is totally subjective to your tastes. If there is veneer peeling off the bottom of the piano, there may be moisture issues that you need to consider. Peeling veneer is a sign of high humidity exposure at some point in the pianos

life, and also tells you that interior problems may have developed – after all, the same glue used on the case parts was also used on the action, soundboard and pin block in most cases.

Refinishing a Console or Spinet usually runs from \$1800-\$2400

Studio Upright \$1900-\$2800

Full size upright - \$3300-\$3800

Player Upright - \$3800-\$4200

A good touch up person is usually \$225-\$375 per call. Touch up is another word for camouflage. If you don't look for the repair you won't see it. If you look for it, you will. Sometimes however, it is so perfect it is almost impossible to find.

***9. Are there stairs involved to move the piano out of its present location? How many? Any turns, twist or landings?***

Shipping can be expensive. Local moves for a spinet or console would start at around \$200-\$275. The larger old uprights Up to \$350. If there are more than 5 stairs involved you can easily double those costs. Get the information and call a professional. I can refer you to the Piano Moving Companies that I personally and professionally use – and believe me I had to kiss a lot of toads to find them all.

Moving a piano is a dangerous proposition if you are not familiar with handling them. I would never recommend that you do yourself it unless you have been professionally trained to do so. A back

or foot injury is going to cost a lot more than a few hundred dollars, and so will a snapped leg of the piano. Hire a professional.

***10. What is the price, and what is included in the price? Delivery? Guarantee? Tuning after delivery?***

Generally, when buying from a private owner, none of these are included – but a sigh of disappointed concern from you may take a few dollars off the price, or just may get you an add on value! Who knows?

Below are some general price guidelines.

Wholesale is what a dealer might pay, and Retail is what a dealer might sell the piano for.

## Spinet Pianos

This is for general advice only. Value greatly depends on condition and the make of the piano.

Years old	Wholesale	Retail
10-20	\$500-\$1000	\$1500-\$2000
20-30	\$0-\$800	\$500-\$1800
30-40	\$0-\$300	\$300-\$1000
Over 40	\$0-\$200	\$300-\$800

# Console Pianos

This is for general advice only. Value greatly depends on condition and make of the piano.

Years old	Wholesale	Retail
10-20 Appraisal Recommended	\$500-\$2000	\$1500-\$4500
20-30 Appraisal Recommended	\$0-\$1500	\$500-\$3000
30-40	\$0-\$500	\$500-\$1000
Over 40	\$0-\$300	\$300-\$1000

# Studio Upright Pianos

This is for general advice only. Value greatly depends on condition and the make of the piano.

Years old	Wholesale	Retail
10-20 Appraisal Recommended	\$800-\$2500	\$1500-\$6500
20-30 Appraisal Recommended	\$500-\$2000	\$1300-\$4000
30-40	\$100-\$800	\$800-\$2000
Over 40	\$0-\$500	\$500-\$1500

# Upright Pianos

This is for general advice only. Value greatly depends on condition and make of piano

Years old	Wholesale	Retail
10-20 Appraisal Recommended	\$2000-\$8000	\$8000-\$15000
20-30 Appraisal Recommended	\$1500-\$3000	\$3000-\$10000
30-50	\$500-\$2000	\$1000-\$5000
Over 50	\$0-\$500	\$0-\$2500

# Upright Player Pianos

This is for general advice only. Value greatly depends on condition and the make of the piano.

Years old	Wholesale	Retail
10-20 Appraisal Recommended	\$2000-\$8000	\$8000-\$15000+
20-30 Appraisal Recommended	\$1500-\$3000	\$3000-\$10000+
30-40	\$500-\$1000	\$1000-\$2000+
Over 40	\$0-\$500	\$500-\$1500+

Ask these questions of the seller, and take some notes. Once you have the information, I would be happy to review your findings with you, to determine if the piano you are considering is a good match for your musical needs.

[Contact me. I would like to review my findings with you.](#)