

GRAND PIANO BUYING QUESTIONS

Like anything else, if you want the right information, you must ask the right questions to get it. This tutorial will give you the right questions, and better yet – What the answers mean to you in dollars and cents.

I pass on 98% of all pianos that are offered to me, 70% of which are “free”. Why would I pass on “free” pianos? 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? These pianos are well worth it.

Most people know little or nothing about the piano they wish to sell. This works in your favor as it emphasizes to most sellers they have not treated this instrument with any value, so why should you pay a lot of money for it? The problem that arises with little or no information is the difficulty in determining if the piano is a bargain or a disaster. Once you gather this information, feel free to [contact us](#). We will review it with you and decide together if it makes sense to investigate further.

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 right side of the piano on the metal plate above the high treble strings. 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 generally determine how well the piano was manufactured to begin with. However, just like General Motors makes a Corvette and a Geo Metro, many piano companies have high and low end models.

The name of the piano 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.

1a. Was this grand piano ever a player piano?

From the early 1900s, and especially in the 20's, many Grand pianos housed a player piano system. Some player piano systems did not change the geometry of the action, and others did. A couple of tell tale signs –

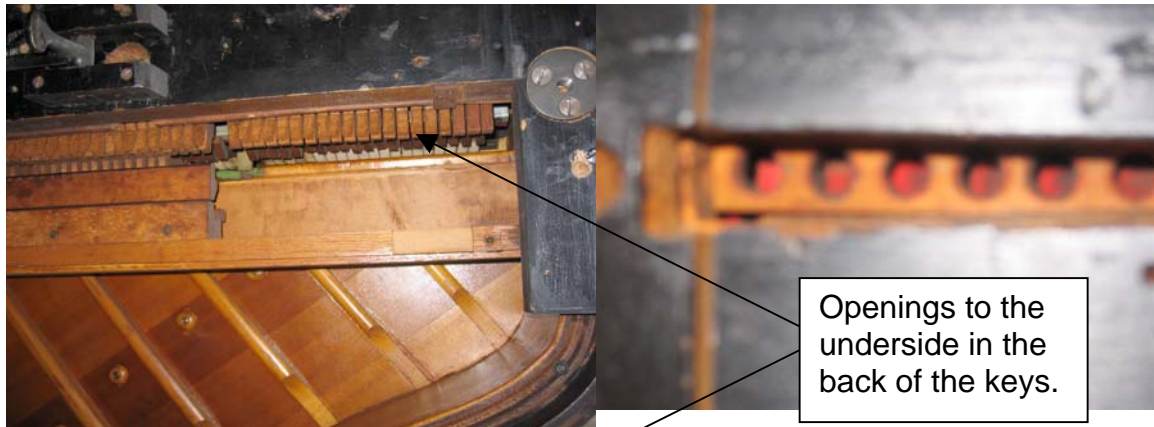
1. Double Legs. Most (but not all) double leg grand pianos were once player pianos. A double leg piano has six legs instead of 3

like the piano shown below. This example is also used because this piano never housed a player system.



2. You need to look at the underside of the piano. If it looks like the pianos below, with large holes to accommodate the player system and tubing, you can be sure it was a player piano at one time. This should lessen the price for you. The best news is that

many times (but not always) this has absolutely no effect on the playing or the sound. You should have such a piano professionally examined before you buy it.



3. How long is the piano from the front of the case to the tail?



Grand Pianos are referred to many times according to size – Baby Grand, Parlor Grand, Concert Grand for example.

Rule of thumb: A larger piano will have a bigger soundboard, with longer bass strings and will deliver a stronger, richer tone.

Exceptions to this rule:

Age, condition, name brand, quality of manufacture. For example, a brand new entry level Grand Piano selling for \$7,000.00 might sound better than 5 foot 7 _ inch Model M Steinway Grand built in 1902 in need of restoration and selling for the same price of \$7,000. The Steinway is a much superior piano in every way but it will need \$15,000.00 or so in restoration. The entry level piano will only need to be tuned at \$135.00.

(Just another tidbit- the Steinway can be sold for \$29,000.00 or possibly more after restoration.)

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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. It should be in excellent condition, provided it had no defects at the time of manufacture, has been treated with loving care and has not experienced a flood or a fire etc.

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 "great shape", I still wouldn't want to trade spinal columns or internal organs with him. You get the picture...

Another Phrase I see is "It needs a *little* T.L.C.". You might think that stands for "Tender Loving Care" – In the Piano World, it usually stands for Tons and Loads of Cash.

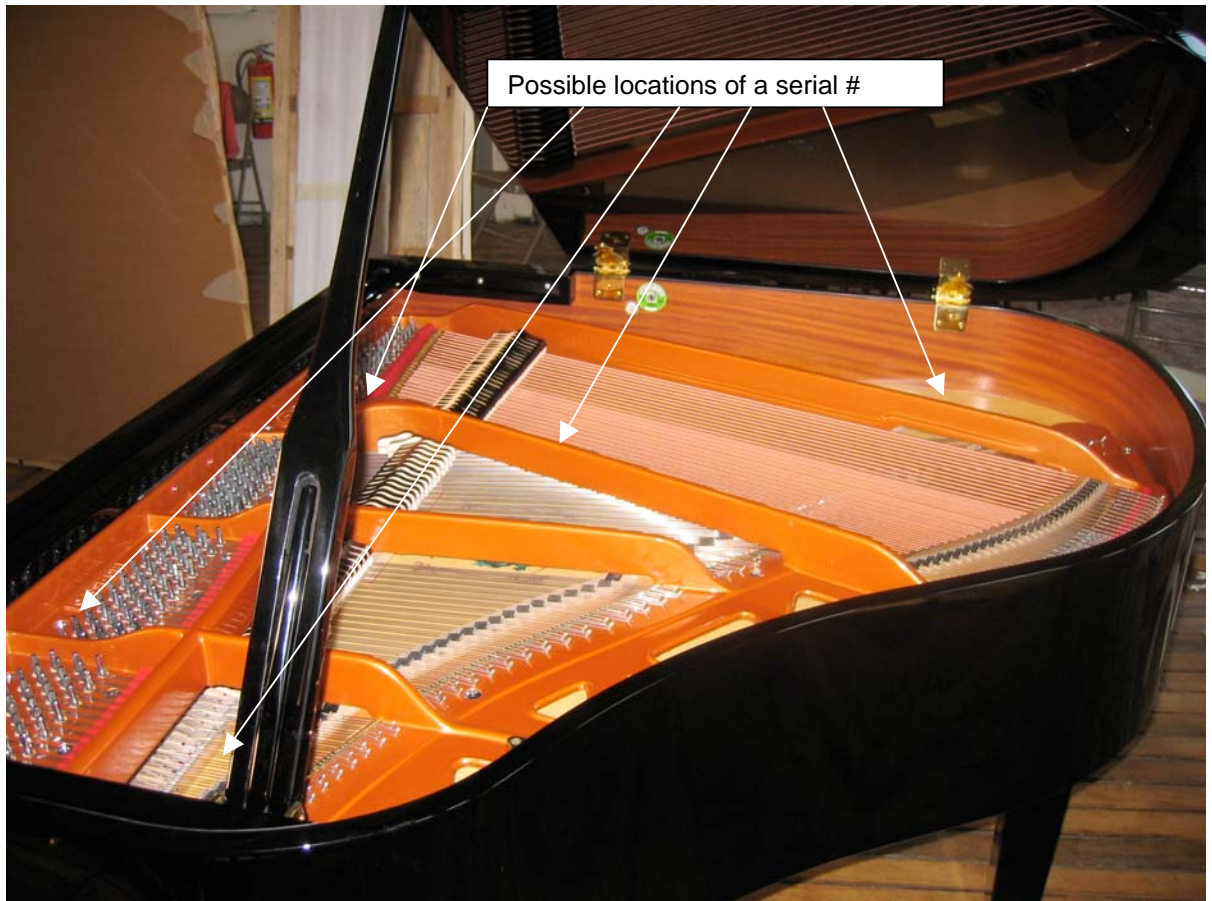
a. Do you have the serial number?

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 between the bass and tenor sections of the strings near the tuning pins and under the music desk.

Other places would be on the soundboard under the high treble strings or on one of the metal plate beams that shoot from front

to back.



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 for 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 – usually 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 lose 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 against the window. Chances are this piano will have gaping cracks in the soundboard and will not hold a tune.

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

A note about cracked soundboards.

Someone, probably those building and selling new pianos, have quite effectively spread the rumor 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

A lack of tuning 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 indicates the action needs to be tightened or glue joints have come loose. 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 and align. For a bit more information on the action, [click here](#)

Generally, to recondition and regulate an action for a Grand piano is about \$400 -\$1,200 for a young piano (30-50 years old) and 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. The going rate to replace and regulate all the action parts is usually between \$4,000-\$5,500.00. Replacing action parts on grand pianos has become very popular over the past 5 years or so, and there are companies who specialize in these after market parts, making this a viable option to buying new.

Another thing to ask is who did the tuning last and what did she or he say about the piano. If you can, acquire the phone number of the last tuner to contact them. This 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 be 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 wont 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). At this point, 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. This is why it is so important to get the facts about any piano before going into this kind of expense.

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 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 \$1,500.00 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. However, if all you have is \$1,500 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 do not 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-\$800 range, unless you want a fine regulation and voicing that could go up to \$1500 or so. 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 needing \$1,000 to \$2,000 worth of reconditioning and fine regulation, and may also need new parts, depending on how well it has been maintained.

70+ years old may need as much as \$1400-\$2500 in reconditioning and felt replacement, plus up to \$2800 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 and generally more desirable because they are novelties. This is totally subjective to your tastes.

If there is veneer peeling off the piano, there may be moisture issues that you need to consider. Peeling veneer is a sign the piano has been exposed to high humidity at some point. It 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 Baby Grand (up to 5'5") usually runs from \$3400-\$5200

Up to 6'6" \$3800-\$5600

7 foot or more \$4200 - \$6500

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, and other times it is still visible. If you are picky about cosmetics touch up may not be an option.

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 with 0-3 steps are usually \$275 to \$400. 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, especially if you are not familiar with handling them. I would never recommend that you move a piano yourself 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?

Ask these questions of the buyer, 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.

[I would be happy to review your findings with you, click here for personal assistance.](#)