

Fabulous FURNITURE 2002

Purchasing a piano Time, research, thought required

BY NICOLE STAFFORD
STAFF WRITER

Buying a piano is no small deal, whether the decision comes from a serious interest in playing or a desire to own one of the most elegant instruments in the world.

With prices ranging in the thousands of dollars, pianos, like automobiles, are "big ticket" items. Add the fact most consumers are less-than-enthused about both the instrument and the piano industry. It's no wonder the process of shopping and buying a piano can be stressful and time-consuming.

As with any major purchase, educating yourself is the best place to start.

"It's important to take some time to get some knowledge," said Rick Bowen, a registered piano technician and president of the Detroit-Windsor Chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild.

READ AND SURF

To start, Bowen recommends reading Larry Fine's *The Piano Book: Buying and Owning a New or Used Piano* (\$19.95 soft, \$27.95 hard, Brookside Press), a comprehensive, well-respected guide in its fourth edition.

The book's companion Web site makes available excerpts from the book and includes two fee-for-service links, a price guide for new pianos and a telephone consultation service.

"You're not going to know everything from reading Larry Fine, but you will perhaps have some questions to ask your salesperson to see how discerning they are," Bowen said.

To round out your basic education and determine what fits your budget, Bowen suggests exploring the Web sites of the major piano manufacturers.

The Web sites are a time-saver and give shoppers an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the major brands and their offerings.

If you plan to buy a used piano, consider Larry Fine's book required reading. Most important, don't buy a used piano without having a registered piano technician take a look first.

Technicians typically charge a fee based on their hourly rates, and the service is equivalent to an auto mechanic's check of a used car. Bowen charges \$70 and estimates the fee range to be \$60 to \$100.

"My opinion is that if you're buying a new piano you're probably not going to have a problem with the name brands," said Bowen. "It's quite a different ball game when you're buying a used piano versus new."

SHOWROOM SHOPPING

Your education shouldn't end the day you step foot in a piano showroom.

Although piano retailers are in the business of selling, it's also their job to educate customers and guide them toward decisions that meet individual needs.

Reputable retailers make educating consumers integral to their services, said Bowen.

"When you go shopping for a piano, you can get confused big time," said Todd Brown, owner of Piano Nation, which has stores in Ann Arbor and Novi with plans for a new location in north Oakland County.

So confusing is the process that Brown has created a written piano buyers guide with a list of all manufactured piano brands to hand out to shoppers.

The emphasis at Evola Music, which has stores in Bloomfield Hills, Canton and Utica, is taking the time to help customers find the right piano for their needs, said Rick Tkac, manager at the Bloomfield Hills store.

And take time you will. Tkac estimates the average Evola customer spends between three and six months before reaching a final purchase decision.

"Rarely do people come into the store and say 'That's a nice piano. I'll take it,'" he said. "I've had customers that take up to a year and longer

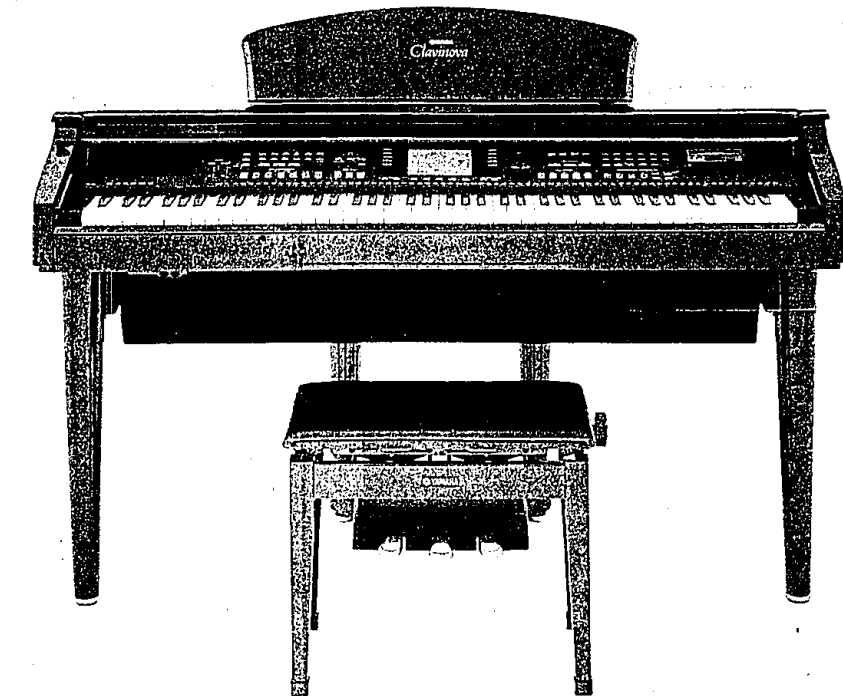


PHOTO COURTESY OF EVOLA MUSIC

Digital pianos are touch-sensitive and have the standard 88 notes. This CVP model retails for \$9,995 at Evola Music. Digital pianos are priced as low as \$1,500. Parents with children beginning lessons often opt for a digital piano since today's "inexpensive" student piano costs about \$3,000.

to learn about pianos, make a selection and a purchase."

More than anything Tkac and staff steer customers toward negotiating a balance of important factors, including piano use and finances.

ESTIMATING USE

Assessing how you or your family plan to use a new piano is very important, said Tkac.

"There are two ways that you approach the purchase of a piano, either as a short-term purchase or a long-term purchase."

For instance, many shoppers are looking for a new piano because a child is starting lessons. Since it's difficult to predict a child's future interest, a short-term, lower-cost purchase probably makes the most sense, said Tkac.

With today's "inexpensive" student piano costing \$3,000 to \$3,500, an appealing alternative for many parents is the digital piano. Touch-sensitive with the standard 88 notes, digital pianos cost \$1,500 to 3,000.

They also appeal to today's tech-savvy youngsters, said Tkac.

"It's the computer piano of the new century. So in the face of all this state-of-the-art technology, the child isn't bored with the piano."

PLEASE SEE PIANOS, J6

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