

# The Piano Technician

by Larry Fine

## Stalking the "reputable" piano dealer

Most of the information on new pianos I've presented thus far has concerned the differences between manufacturers. Almost as important to you—indeed, sometimes more important—is your choice of a dealer from whom to buy the piano. The principal reason why this is important is that, as we've seen most pianos arrive from the factory needing a considerable amount of adjustment and tuning before they are ready for you to inspect, much less buy. Dealers vary greatly in the interest they take in providing this necessary pre-sale service as well as in other ways.

Magazine articles on piano purchase invariably advise the reader to find a "reputable" dealer. Just exactly what that means, or how to find such a business, the articles rarely explain. Let's take a look at what you want from a dealer, and some ways to find one who matches your needs.

*You want a dealer who maintains high service standards.* Standards vary a great deal from store to store. One technician from Colorado wrote me about the standard practice where he works: "I would expect, if I were buying a piano, that everything would be in order with it when new, i.e., completely regulated, up to pitch, and voiced to some degree of evenness of tone across the keyboard. Of course, they are not. Dealer preps are essentially non-existent at our store. They only want to pay technicians for tuning—Don't spend more than about an hour on a piano, the dealers instruct—and pretend that regulating is just sugar on top."

Most dealers realize that they can get away without servicing their pianos at all and hardly anybody will know the difference. Some dealers, though, service their pianos anyway, and to standards that are considerably higher than those of both the manufacturer and of their unknowledgeable customers. Others take advantage of the cost savings, figuring that if you can't tell the difference, then you probably don't need—or deserve—the extra service.

At the very least, a store that expects to service its pianos properly should have a well-equipped shop on the premises. Don't buy from a furniture, department, or mall store lacking a servicing shop, but which assures you that the independent technician they hire will service the piano after it's been moved to your home. Ask several technicians which stores have the best service departments.

*You can tell a good dealer by the company he or she keeps.* You want a dealer whose offerings are, for the most part, in the medium-to-high-quality range. Most dealers offer a variety of different brands that cover a broad range of price points, so that they will be equipped to cater to any customer's desires. The exact brand they choose to sell depend on what franchises are available (since a franchise usually comes with a protected sales territory), the terms offered by the manufacturer, the popularity and reputation of the brand, and other considerations.

You can expect even very fine dealers to sell some brands or models that they can't honestly recommend. They may feel that they have to have such pianos on hand for the customer who refuses to buy anything better, or they may be required by a manufacturer with whom they do business to stock its entire line, from the cheapest spinet to the concert grand. However, when a dealer sells mostly unrecommended junk brands, you really have to question their knowledge and integrity, even if there are a few high-quality pianos on the sales floor.

In particular, the Steinway dealer is often the best dealer in any particular locale. The Steinway dealership is among the most coveted, and with some exceptions Steinway chooses only dealers who keep especially high service standards and have an exceptional reputation. Don't worry—Steinway dealers also sell less expensive brands. But the service standards they use on their Steinways are likely to rub off on their lesser brands. Conversely, the low standards with which dealers of mediocre pianos service their stock are likely to carry over to the few high-quality pianos they may keep around.

*You want a dealer who keeps the pianos on the sales floor in tune.* Nothing can be more frustrating than trying to shop for a piano and finding half of them out of tune. There's no way you can adequately judge the tone of a piano that way. Of course, it's unreasonable to expect that each of two hundred pianos will be in concert-perfect tune at all times, but most should be quite playable and musical. You can expect that some of the cheapest promotional pianos that will be left untuned, partly to discourage anyone from buying them.

*You want a dealer whose salespeople are knowledgeable, courteous, and helpful.* Many salespeople know very little about pianos and could just as

well be selling shoes or appliances. What little they do know has been fed to them in special seminars sponsored by manufacturers' marketing departments, where they learn to sell the so-called advantages of the various gimmicks I've described in previous columns. On the other hand, there are salespeople who either have a prior technical background, or are doubling as both technician and salesperson, or have taken the time and trouble to find out what this field is really all about. Even if they aren't technicians, they will not have to bluff their way through answering any technical questions you may have.

All other things being equal, a dealership owned and operated by piano technicians is likely to be more conscientious than one owned by businesspeople with little technical background, and many piano rebuilding shops carry new instruments as a sideline. Technicians are more likely to be devoted to their craft, and so carry better quality instruments and service them more carefully than non-technicians. They are also, perhaps, more likely to be straightforward in their business dealings and rely less on deceptive sales techniques. Of course, there are always exceptions to generalizations such as this, so this rule should not be followed religiously.

*You want a dealership which seems as if it will be in business for a long time, and will be willing and able to provide warranty service should you need it.* Of course, there's no way you can tell ahead of time which businesses are likely to fall prey to periodic recessions. My point here is to warn you against doing business with certain kinds of companies—not legitimate piano dealers—which specialize in liquidating discontinued merchandise, or in certain shopping malls where businesses seem to start and fail with great regularity. Even if the store from which you bought the piano is no longer in business, it still may be possible to receive warranty service, but it will be more difficult.

While no guaranteed prescription can be given for finding a reputable dealer, keeping these guidelines in mind and asking local independent piano technicians for their recommendations will most likely lead you to a dealer you can trust and enjoy doing business with.

Next month: Prices, sales, and merchandising.

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