

Acoustic or Digital Piano - The Great Controversy

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It is hard to find a piano/keyboard teacher who hasn't been asked about his/her preference regarding acoustic or digital pianos. This article is an attempt to outline the arguments of both the "pro-digital" and "pro-acoustic" camps. Products of rather different philosophies and expectations, these instruments have clearly established their own artistic niches in the mysterious planet of music.

I will start with the most common arguments of the "pro-digital" camp:

1. **Acoustic pianos are simply "archaic technologies"**. They are doomed to be replaced by the digital pianos and synthesizers the same way typewriters were replaced by computers.
2. **Acoustic pianos will always be "nothing but pianos"**. Digital pianos can produce hundreds of different sounds, and they can provide automatic rhythmic and instrumental accompaniment in a huge variety of styles.
3. **Higher quality digital pianos can easily record without the need of microphones and studios**. The tempo of the recorded pieces can be changed at will, and the pieces can later be edited in any imaginable way through a computer programme.
4. **Higher quality digital pianos become better and better in mimicking the touch and sound of a grand piano**.
5. **Digital pianos can be used with headphones**; they are more neighbor-friendly.
6. **Digital pianos are cheaper to purchase**; they don't need tuning and regulation, and are hardly ever affected by temperature and humidity changes.
7. **Digital pianos are lighter, easier and cheaper to transport**.

The arguments of the pro-digital camp are, as a rule, simple, well organized, and easy to understand; in contrast, the arguments of the pro-acoustic camp tend to be emotional, philosophical, and – sadly – often incomprehensible for the general public.

1. **The sound of acoustic pianos is more beautiful**. The sheer physical joy of a "real" acoustic sound with its vibration and overtones can not be produced by digital means. True, the sound of a good digital piano is taken from the sound of a real grand; however, we tend to forget that it comes to us via speakers having quite small vibrating area. Its equivalent, the sound board of an acoustic piano, is incomparably larger, thus creating much more spatial sound. Imagine yourself in a concert hall listening to a symphony orchestra playing *pianissimo*; then imagine yourself in the FOYER listening to the same orchestra playing *mezzo forte*. In the

later case you hear the sound through an open door leading to the hall. Will both experiences be the same? Clearly not.

2. **Regardless of the advancement of technology the touch of an acoustic piano is superior.** True, a touch-sensitive digital piano will react to differences in key velocity, but it will respond with **stepped, pre-programmed variations**. Higher quality digital pianos contain more possible variations by using more memory to store the digital data, but always in predetermined steps of volume and tone color, and always with a **limit of possible responses**. Performance of classical music and jazz is based on great dynamic contrasts, as well as an incredible variety of nuances and shades. Clearly, these are weaker points of the digital instruments.
3. **Acoustic pianos represent our need for devices hardly affected by change of time and technologies.** Have you ever purchased a digital piano to discover that the exactly same model is selling for half price a year later? Needless to say, acoustic pianos have much lower level of depreciation than digital; in some rare cases their value could even increase. Also, the acoustic pianos are usually much more beautiful as pieces of furniture. Created by craftsman, NOT factory workers, acoustic pianos represent both our link to the great tradition of the past and our innate desire to possess a valuable artistic object; an object we are happy to leave to our children and grandchildren.

Lastly, I am tempted to quote the great Keith Jarrett who probably sums up the feelings of the majority of the pro-acoustic camp in his introduction to Larry Fine's *The Piano Book* :

“I personally feel the piano to be far in advance of any of the more recent keyboard instruments in that it still demands that you use your whole body and all your muscles, whereas everything since has been denying that need. Artificially adding piano-like touch control to a synthesizer is about as much of an improvement as electrifying a pepper mill. So what? [. . .] The piano answered the artists' need to be more involved *not* to get more done with less effort. The “artistic need” that has generated instruments since the piano, on the other hand, is the need to find something that can be successfully played [. . .] by typists on a lunch break. [This is a product of] desire to be creative in one's “spare time.” To me, leisure and creativity are as far apart as the *Reader's Digest* and the *Well Tempered Clavier*.”

To sum up, the digital and the acoustic piano are products of very different human needs. Even though both are related to the art of music performance the former fulfills our need for modernity, practicality, and entertainment, while the later relates to our longing for permanence, unchanging values, and deeper level of artistic involvement.