

In Praise of Tickling the Ivories

-Rhea Ashmead, age 17

Ragtime mahogany, living room maple, antique oak, and performance black, the pianos were everywhere, overflowing the entry way and backing into the rear repair shop. The arrangement of the pianos in the store had reached the point of being either purposeful, to vex those with an obsessive compulsive disorder or random, because the arranger was a musician who didn't notice he was playing a mini black grand piano while sitting on a mahogany upright bench. To piano players, though, the untidiness mattered little compared to the prospect of playing a beautifully tuned and immaculately maintained Steinway. The musicians' reaction was like shopaholics' to a shoe sale or trekkies' to a sci-fi convention. To a pianist, playing the piano is the most important, fulfilling, and beautiful experience that exists.

The piano produces more musical sounds than most other instruments and is capable of playing harmony as well as melody. An Italian inventor, named Bartolommeo Cristofori, was credited, in 1709, with inventing the first true piano, although it was based on two earlier keyboard designs: the harpsichord and the clavichord. He called his invention the pianoforte. This original piano, however, had thin strings causing the sound to be shallow and quiet. For a long time the pianoforte was relatively unknown until an influential article was published in Europe which raved about Cristofori's invention. Several instrument makers, such as Broadwood, Érard, Babcock, and Steinway were inspired by this article and resolved to foster and develop the pianoforte. Through their lifetimes, these innovators gave the piano its trademark rich tones by designing enhanced hammers, sturdier frames, and thicker strings. Their technological improvements created the basis for the modern piano. Today, Cristofori's invention has become a prominent sound in the universal language of music as thousands of people from different ethnicities and cultures have devoted their lives to the art of playing and composing on the piano.

A pianist's devotion to the piano can best be described as an addiction: hearing a melody echoed from one's fingers as they dance across ivory keys in light staccatos or rolling legatos. Sometimes playing the piano is a desire, which develops as an ache in the hands or a sensation of gripping something tightly then letting go. Instead of heroin, one shoots chords and scales and instead of cocaine, one snorts musty smelling music scores. It's an itch that can only be scratched by placing a finger on a key and pressing down until a single clear note is released. The addict hungers for musical euphoria, the "...only cheap and unpunished rapture upon earth" (Sydney Smith), that comes from a sense that an emotion has been perfectly expressed by the climax of a glorious crescendo or the end of a lilting of ritardando. A sense of fulfillment that the "...mediator between the spiritual and the sensual life" (Ludwig Van Beethoven) has been found by the simple brushing of the keys.

The sound of a piano is magnificent when it drifts on early morning air, over the pillows and under the blankets, or when it haunts the late hours of the evening. The sound of the piano, however, is only beautiful when accompanied by matching tone because, while all pianos have the same enchanting sounds, not all of them have similar tones.

Some pianos are fashioned to capture the sharp precise air of the classical epoch while others are created with a peanut butter melancholy tone to portray the dreaminess of the romantic era. Serenading nocturnes and lulling berceuses, performed on a bright piano would be barren sounding whereas, on a rich piano, they would become something magical. A sentimental and passionate piano player would be unable to showcase his musicality using bright tones, whereas he would excel if he were to perform on a piano with thicker, deep tones. For a piano “it's beaut[iful sounds] that captures [the] attention; [the tone or] personality which captures [the] heart.” (Oscar Wilde) The tone adds the colour to the canvas, the personality to the human, and the feeling to the sound. The piano's sound is beautiful but only the tone can make it mesmerizing.

The piano converts silence into sound like a paintbrush transforms a blank canvas into a scene. The piano is a first love that holds an important spot in one's heart. The piano is a spiritual fulfillment, a haven where one can curl up between the notes and “... the cares that infest the day shall fold their tents like the Arabs and as silently steal away” (Longfellow). The piano is beauty, fulfillment and importance. Playing the piano is a consciousness that only those who are willing to sit upon its bench, rest a foot on its pedals, and tickle its ivories, will find.

Dedicated to my piano teacher, Bev Knight.