

# Chapter 1

## I Love a Piano

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding what makes the piano unique
  - ▶ Getting acquainted with the instrument and reading music
  - ▶ Discovering what you may already know about playing piano
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***I*** love to run my fingers o'er the keys, the ivories."

These lyrics from the 1915 Irving Berlin song, "I Love a Piano," were no doubt true for many people when they were written nearly 100 years ago. The piano was in its heyday, and your average Joe or Jane felt owning and playing the piano in their home was almost as important as putting a roof over it. But neither the song nor the sentiment has lost its charm; the lyrics certainly ring true for me and a whole bunch of other people, too. The piano remains a very popular instrument, with the number of people who love the piano growing and its popularity spreading throughout the world. Even as the piano is treasured for its quality as an instrument, it also adapts itself to the changing times through technological advances.

This chapter helps you understand what makes the piano so unique and what's involved in learning to play the piano. You may find out that you know a lot more about music than you thought you did, even if you're a beginner.

## *What's So Special About the Piano?*

Playing the piano involves the following fundamentally musical tasks:

- ✓ Playing different pitches and melodies
- ✓ Controlling the attack and release of a note
- ✓ Playing different dynamics (relative loudness and softness)

But playing the piano is different from playing other instruments in some important respects, and the piano has several attributes that make it an ideal tool for learning and understanding music.

## *Advantages to playing the piano*

The piano occupies a central position in the world of music. It's the gold standard of musical instruments, utilized by composers and arrangers and featured routinely in nearly all musical styles, in chamber groups, rock bands, and jazz trios. (Everything except marching bands.) The following characteristics make the piano a unique instrument — in a great way:

- ✓ **You can play many different notes at the same time.** The fancy word for this is *polyphonic*.
- ✓ **It's a complete solo instrument.** You can play a complete song or other musical work without requiring additional accompaniment or other help from your musical friends. That makes the piano satisfying and self-sufficient.
- ✓ **It's the perfect accompaniment.** You can accompany a singer, a choir, a dance class, a silent movie, your own opera, or your own soap opera, not to mention any other instrument.
- ✓ **You can play almost anything on the piano.** The piano has an unmatched repertoire of music. You name it, there's piano music for it.

## *Advantages to learning music at the piano*

The piano is an ideal instrument for learning all about music, starting with the design of the keyboard. As you sit in front of your keyboard, the notes are laid out before your very eyes in a clear, organized, and orderly way. Understanding and playing musical pitches is quite easy because the keyboard presents a clear visual image for your brain to process the way musical notes go up (higher pitch), down (lower pitch), or stay the same.

Each key on the keyboard produces a single, distinct pitch, and you can't beat that for simplicity. Not much skill is required to make a nice, musical sound. Compared with some other instruments I shall refrain from naming (well, okay, twist my arm: violin, clarinet, trombone, trumpet, bassoon, oboe, and tuba), playing any key on the keyboard, no matter how high or low the pitch, is as easy as playing any other key.

Another advantage of the piano is that you can play chords and layer sounds. The keyboard makes it easy to play harmonies and immediately hear how a combination of notes sounds. This really seals the deal as far as I'm concerned.

## *A skill and an art*

After all is said and done, the reason playing piano is so special may be that it's an activity that invites your full participation and rewards you just as

completely. It has its mental side and its physical side. It requires both creativity and discipline, and engaging your mind and body is deeply satisfying.

As you learn to read music and play the notes on the piano, you create information loops from your brain throughout your body. The first loop is from your eyes to your brain, as you take in the notes on the page and process the information. In the second loop, your brain sends signals to your hands and fingers, telling them how and where to move. Your fingers start to develop a sense of what it feels like to move around the keyboard and use different kinds of touch to produce different results from the piano. A third loop is made as your ears hear the sound from the piano and send information back to your brain for it to process: Did I play the right notes and rhythms? Did I play a note too loudly or softly? Does what I play sound musical, overall? All this information helps you to modify the signals you send throughout your body to improve the results.

This full-sensory experience is paired with an interpretive element, as your inner artist is at work. The notes and directions on the page can only go so far in describing how the music should sound, which is why two pianists playing the same piece will create noticeably different performances. Even two performances by the same pianist will come out differently. Playing the piano lets you be the decider when you make music: how fast, how slow, how much more, how much less, how many encores to give your audience.

The combination of executing skills and interpreting the music is something that happens each time you play. Even when you simply play what's written, your personal interpretation comes through. With the piano, you're a musician from day one.

## *Why People Learn to Play the Piano (And Why They Often Quit)*

Many people start taking piano lessons as kids, when they don't have much say in the matter. But adults come to the piano for many reasons, including wanting to take it up again because it didn't stick the first time around, when they were kids. Following are some reasons you may want to learn or relearn to play piano:

- ✓ **You want to recreate your favorite songs and compositions.** When you play a piece of music on the piano, you bring that music to life. Written music is like a blueprint — a set of directions that tell you what notes to play and when and how to play them. It takes a performer to complete the process that starts in the composer's mind but is unfulfilled until the music reaches the listener's ear.

- ✔ **You like a challenge.** There's no doubt that getting to the intermediate and advanced levels of piano takes time, patience, and practice. Some people relish this challenge. Whatever your ambition, learning to play piano is a never-ending challenge given the wealth of material at all levels. Some people set goals for themselves — a certain piece they want to be able to play, or to be able to play piano for others at a party or family gathering. There are plenty of rewards to be had along the way, and sticking with it pays off when you start playing your favorite songs or when you get the chance to play music with others. There's nothing like being able to say, "I'm with the band."
- ✔ **You want to be able to play music in almost any style.** Playing a pop song or a classical sonata on piano doesn't require a different set of notes; when you know how to read and play piano music, you can play classical, jazz, rock, country, folk, cabaret, Broadway show tunes, and more. If you can play piano, you can speak the universal language of music.
- ✔ **You think it will make you better at math.** It's true that math plays a big part in music, from the nature of sound itself to the formula for the notes in a scale to the symmetrical structure of a 32-bar song form. Piano teachers know from experience that playing piano requires focus and concentration. They also know that piano students improve in these areas as their playing improves and they gain experience. But some experts (for example, my eighth-grade algebra teacher) strongly refute the notion that playing the piano improves math skills.

Unfortunately, failure to quickly reach any of these goals leads some piano students to throw in the towel. It's important to be realistic with your timetable and your expectations as you begin learning piano. With that in mind, here are some top reasons people give up playing the piano; don't let yourself fall victim to them, too:

- ✔ **Frustration:** Learning to play the piano takes patience. Coordinating hands and fingers, reading music, and committing to practice, practice, practice are the refrain of musicians everywhere, but making it all fun is the goal of this book.
- ✔ **No time:** Getting yourself to a basic beginner level of piano doesn't require hours and hours of keyboard work every day. Regular practice sessions in which you can focus and learn comfortably do wonders for improvement.
- ✔ **Self-criticism:** No doubt you're your own worst critic, and nobody likes playing wrong notes. Short-circuit your inner critic by celebrating small achievements (they're achievements nonetheless), and show off to your friends and family along the way so they can support you.

For tips on making the most of your practice sessions, see Chapter 18.

## *Getting to Know Your Instrument*

The first step in learning to play the piano is familiarizing yourself with your instrument. The piano is a complex and fascinating contraption, and the modern piano reflects hundreds of years of developments and improvements in design and sound. In Chapter 2, I tell you all about the piano's structure: the names of its parts and how it, through you, produces sound. I also cover the major modern development of digital pianos, which produce sound electronically, and the ways they differ from their acoustic counterparts.

A prospective buyer has plenty of options when approaching the keyboard market today. The two styles of acoustic piano, grand and upright, come in a variety of sizes and prices, and both produce sound in a similar way. Their hammer action design allows you to control the volume and tone quality through the speed and nuance of your touch as you press down a key and send a felt-covered wooden hammer to strike a string, or set of strings, inside the piano. The resonance of the string vibrating is amplified by the wooden soundboard, which is parallel to the strings.

The wide range of digital keyboards available today offers some attractive alternatives to acoustic pianos, even if they fall short of capturing the sound and feel of the real thing. As I explain in Chapter 2, these keyboards use sampled sounds — of pianos, electric pianos, harpsichords, and organs, as well as other instruments and sound effects — that are stored as digital information. You play these sounds by pressing a key and hearing the sound amplified electronically. Digital keyboards put a greatly expanded library of sound at your fingertips. Other advantages include greater portability and “silent” practicing with headphones.

The hybrid piano, covered in Chapter 3, combines acoustic and digital technology and is another enticing option available today. Though expensive, these pianos are well on their way to fulfilling their promise to combine the best of both worlds.

Check out Chapters 2 through 4 to find out more about all the keyboard instruments, compare styles and designs, prepare yourself to go keyboard shopping, and find out how to care for your keyboard at home.

If anyone predicted that the piano would grow obsolete with the development of electronic instruments in the last 50 years, they have been proved wrong. (And I hope that they're happy things turned out for the better.) The piano is popular in both its old-fashioned acoustic version and all the newer versions that feature digital sound; automatic playing features; and recording, editing, and Web-integration technology. In other words, pianos are the best of both worlds these days, and no one needs to compromise if they don't want to. The piano has adapted and changed with the times, yet it's still treasured for the fundamental things that haven't changed. It's still an ideal

solo instrument to have at home, it's ready to be played whenever the mood strikes you, and its intuitive design satisfies both your fingers and your ears.

## *Understanding the Language of Music*

Playing the piano means reading music. The best thing to keep in mind is that, in a way, you already know the language. You've heard it, sung it, danced to it, and gone to beddy-bye to it your whole life. If you haven't read music before, think of it as assigning new names and concepts to things you already know and making connections from the new language to the language you've already learned aurally.

Reading music means reading pitches, rhythms, and other notational symbols invented to communicate music from composer to performer. Notes (see Chapter 6) and rhythms (see Chapters 7 and 8) simply tell you what pitch to play and how long or short to play it. The grand staff, which joins together a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff (see Chapter 6), matches the keys on the keyboard to the notes on the page and tells you which hand you use to play them. Musical rests (see Chapter 7) tell you when *not* to play (and how long not to play). Time signatures (see Chapter 7) and key signatures (see Chapter 13) help organize music into rhythmic patterns and tonal areas, respectively, that apply throughout a song. Expressive directions (see Chapter 15) make up the remaining elements of music notation you can look forward to learning: how soft or how loud to play the notes, with what kind of touch should you press the key, the general tempo and feel of the music, and so on.



When you know how to read music, you can play most any song or other musical composition written at the beginner level, no matter the style of music.

### **Coordinating mind and body**

At the heart of playing the piano is movement. The subtle movements required to play piano may not be as big as those required of ballet or swimming, but they're numerous. As a result, playing piano involves lots of coordination, which is where practice comes into the picture.

Playing while you read involves counting, reading, and responding. You achieve a smooth

choreography as you coordinate your mind and body and continually isolate and integrate your hands and fingers and the melody and the harmony. You may start by playing a melody in your right hand, adding a left-hand part when your right hand is secure, and adding facility as you go. Keep in mind that it's normal and necessary to progress by taking one step back and two steps forward.

## *Developing an ear for horizontal and vertical music*

Among the challenges and rewards of learning piano are understanding and combining the melodic and harmonic elements of music. In a way, a music score is a kind of sound map in which proceeding from left to right represents the horizontal flow of music through time, and any one freeze-frame of the score shows the vertical combination of notes sounding together at that moment, from low to high. A piano player, like the conductor of an orchestra, controls these vertical and horizontal elements and the total content in the music, and expresses the complete musical picture, not just a single component.

You get to know these individual components throughout this book and combine them naturally as you go. Part III focuses on melodies and scales (the horizontal parts), and Part IV focuses on harmony (the vertical part).

## *Getting to know musical forms and styles*

Even the simplest melody, say a lullaby or a folk song, carries with it a musical form and a musical style. To describe its qualities is to define the form and style. For example, “Frere Jacques,” a song you play in Chapter 9, gets its form from the way each of its four phrases is repeated, doubling the length of the song. The simplicity of the melody and the repetition define the song’s style as a nursery rhyme, perfect for teaching a child.

As you play the other songs in this book, you come to understand that form and style describe how the musical material is used. For example, when you play “Worried Man Blues” in Chapter 13, you see that its opening phrase is repeated with different notes but the same rhythms in its second phrase. The third phrase is the same as the opening phrase, but it leads into a new phrase, the fourth and last one. These four phrases make up the melody to the song and have a form that can be expressed as ABAC, with each letter representing each phrase.

Rhythm plays a powerful role in defining musical style. Both the Mozart sonata and the country riff in Chapter 17 use musical ornaments (covered in Chapter 15), but the songs use them in completely different ways. The most noticeable difference is in the way the ornaments affect the rhythm. Popular music grew increasingly rhythmic in the 20th century and continues to grow and develop rhythmically more than harmony or melody. Jazz developed its own rhythmic language that was completely different than anything else that came before it.

## The Best Way to Play

You'll pick up quite a lot of new skills as you read and play *Piano For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, but I hope to emphasize a very important point about *how* you learn to play piano. You get the best results when you're comfortable and enjoying yourself, so keep the following tips in mind:

- ✓ **Be comfortable.** Comfort starts with freedom of movement. Make sure you're physically and mentally at ease when you practice, and watch out for signs of fatigue and tension. Take a break when you need it.
- ✓ **Play what interests you.** Find the songs and sections that use material you find interesting and useful for meeting your piano goals.
- ✓ **Appreciate the small steps.** Remind yourself that your rewards will come at all levels but may not come every day.
- ✓ **A beginner can play good music.** There's plenty of good music published for piano players of all levels, including beginners. If you want to play a song or style that's not in this book, the resources in Chapter 19 can help you find an easy version that you can enjoy while you continue to learn and practice.

## What You Already Know About Playing the Piano

Even if you've never even touched a piano before, you'll be surprised at how many things you can do right away. You also may already know a few pertinent musical facts — and if you don't, you can master them right now.

- ✓ **You can play a pentatonic scale.**

Go to your piano or keyboard and play a sequence of black keys, up, down, or both. You've just played a five-note scale with a fancy name: *pentatonic*. The next time your friends ask what you've been up to, tell them you've been practicing some pentatonic scales.

- ✓ **You know the note names used in music.**

The seven note names used in music follow the letters of the alphabet from A through G. When you play the white keys, you play notes like C, F, A, and D. And as you find out in Chapter 2, you add either “sharp” or “flat” to those letters to name the black keys.

**✓ You can name the two clefs used in reading piano music.**

You read music for piano using the treble clef and the bass clef. Most of the time, your right hand plays notes in the treble clef, and your left hand plays notes in the bass clef.

**✓ You know the total number of keys on a standard piano.**

They don't call 'em the old 88s for nothin'. You can count all the keys to see for yourself. Or check out the black and white keys: There's a pattern of 12 consecutive black and white keys from the right end of the keyboard to the left. Look for seven of these groups and the first four keys that begin another group before you run out of keys to count.

$7 \times 12 = 84$ , plus four extra equals 88.

**✓ You can identify different musical styles.**

Listen to Track 1 on the CD that's at the back of this book. You hear short examples of four different piano pieces. (That's me on the piano, by the way!) Match each excerpt with one of the music styles listed below. Even if you don't know the pieces, you have enough listening experience to hear that blues is different from a baroque piece by Bach. (You can find out the names of these pieces in Chapter 2.)

<i><b>Composer</b></i>	<i><b>Style</b></i>
Scott Joplin	Ragtime
J.S. Bach	Baroque
Erik Satie	Slow, post-Impressionist waltz
W.C. Handy	Blues

