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Why a piano needs to be tuned.

By Jim Salvatore , Piano Technician

If you own a piano or considering the purchase of one it’s important to have your piano tuned on a regular basis by a qualified piano technician. The piano should be tuned to the standard A440 pitch. Although there are situations when an alternative pitch is requested or needed. If a piano is new it is recommended it be tuned at least 3 or 4 times in the first year after purchase. Generally speaking a piano should be tuned twice a year, however if the instrument is fairly stable an annual tuning will suffice.

I often come across pianos that have not been serviced in quite a long time. A piano needs to be “up to pitch” at A440 for it to deliver its most pleasing tone. A piano low in pitch can be in tune with itself but the tone quality will suffer. Some very old pianos cannot be brought to pitch because there is the danger of structural failure that prevents the piano being tuned to standard pitch. In those cases the piano is tuned to a lower pitch but is an unsatisfactory instrument.

A piano which is not close to the proper pitch requires extra work to get it to pitch. The piano technician may need to go over the piano more than once before a fine tuning. These additional tunings will result in an additional charge beyond the piano technicians standard tuning fee.

Pianos go out of tune from a variety of factors. The most important factor causing a piano to go out of tune is the change in humidity from season to season. This affects all pianos, good and bad, new and old, played and not played. Consider a piano is made mostly of wood it is understandable humidity contributes an important factor in piano technology. A piano in an environment with stable humidity will improve the stability of pitch if other pitch altering factors are not present. Another factor affecting the pitch is slipping or weak tuning pins. This is not present in a good quality new piano however in an older piano that has experienced seasonal humidity changes through the years ,the pin block loses its tight grip on the tuning pins. The string tension causes the tuning pin to rotate slowly and over a period of time the pitch will go flat. Other factors contributing changes in piano pitch are temperature, stretching of the strings and playing.

An out of tune of tune piano can be painful to listen to and be discouraging and distracting to a student. Many piano teachers do not travel to the students home because the piano is not up to pitch and/ or needs other maintenance.

A piano is a complex piece of artistry. A standard size piano has more than 200 strings that must be tuned separately and more than 10,000 individual parts that must be properly regulated for the piano to sound its best and function properly. A piano properly maintained can last a long time and provide your family and friends with the joy of music.

Jim Salvatore is a piano technician providing service to Fairfield and New Haven counties. He is an associate member of the Connecticut chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild and has served as the chapter secretary. He is a member of the Westport Community Band and plays the Tuba.

If you have questions about your piano his email address is james.salvatore @snet.net or call him at 203-260-8694. The web address is www.jimsalvatorepianoservice.com