

How to Sell Your Piano

by Steve Cohen and *Piano Buyer* staff

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Selling a used piano can be a challenge: Since the Recession, used pianos at all price levels have plummeted in value. Used pianos for sale far outnumber shoppers to buy them, making it a buyer's market. Several conditions—some inherent to used-piano sales and some specific to current times—have tended to increase supply and/or drive down the prices of used pianos:

- Globalization and the computerization of manufacturing have made inexpensive, new, high-quality consumer-grade pianos from China and Indonesia abundantly available, leaving lower-quality used instruments from previous eras with little value.
- Digital pianos have become so advanced in tone and touch, and so competitive in price, that for many on a limited budget, a new digital piano may be a better buy than a used acoustic.
- Baby boomers, retiring and downsizing, are flooding the market with the pianos their kids took lessons on. In many cases, these instruments were inherited from the boomers' own parents and are now 50 or more years old.
- The Internet, especially websites such as Craigslist and eBay, makes it easier than ever for sellers to advertise at little or no cost.
- Because people tend to sell when moving, time pressure is involved—as the moving date approaches, often the asking price must be cut drastically.

For buyers on a limited budget, the costs involved in moving a piano to its new location and getting it in good playing condition after the move are relatively high, leaving them with less to pay you for the piano itself. Typical buyer costs include:

- \$200–\$500 to move an upright piano, or \$300–\$600 to move a grand, within a 25-mile radius and to a home with no more than three or four steps. Costs can double for shipping over greater distances and/or to more challenging destinations, such as a building with many steps, or to an upper floor.

- \$200–\$300 to pitch-raise and tune the piano. For most pianos offered for sale, a pitch raise is necessary to compensate for years of tuning neglect.
- \$200–\$400 for necessary repairs, regulating the action, and voicing of a console or upright, and twice that for a decent-quality grand piano. Almost all pianos over 10 years old will need this work to play well and sound good.

Thus, even when the seller is willing to give away the piano, it still can cost a recipient \$1,000–\$2,000 to accept it. This expense alone can approach or exceed the budget of a shopper looking for a low-cost option, and means that instruments of lower quality, low brand-name recognition, and less-than-stellar reputation tend to attract little or no sales interest.

Is My Piano Saleable?

To determine if your piano is suitable for resale, there are three basic things to consider: appearance, brand, and age/condition.

Appearance: People who buy decent-quality pianos usually have well-decorated environments for them to go into. This means that, in a buyer’s market, many pianos that play well may nevertheless not be saleable at any price if they don’t look as good as they play. This is true of most vertical pianos with badly scarred or damaged cases, as well as older, off-brand pianos in plain cabinets. If the piano looks worn, it’s less likely to sell.



Brand: Well-known brands with good reputations will generally generate more interest and be valued more than brands that lack name and/or quality recognition. The brands today that are most saleable are Baldwin, Kawai, Steinway & Sons, and Yamaha. Performance-quality, handmade brands—such as Bechstein, Blüthner, Bösendorfer, Fazioli, Grotrian, Mason & Hamlin, and Sauter—though without wide name recognition among the general public, have great reputations among those who know them, and so are also eminently saleable. On the other

hand, some well-known piano brands from the past, such as Wurlitzer and Kimball, may be difficult to sell because their reputations are not particularly good.

Age/Condition: Many piano owners mistakenly believe that pianos made over 100 years ago are valued as “antiques.” They aren’t, with the occasional exceptions of instruments with unusually decorated cases in fine condition—and even these can have difficulty finding a home. Most pianos are made with a life expectancy of 40 to 60 years, and, contrary to popular belief, do not get better with age.



Pianos that do not sell well due to age (among other factors) include:

- Vertical pianos over 40 years old of little-known brand
- Most pianos, grand or vertical, over 60 years old. Exceptions include: a few top-notch performance-quality brands such as Bechstein, Blüthner, Mason & Hamlin, and Steinway & Sons; pianos that have been completely rebuilt; and occasional instruments that, due to low use and favorable environmental conditions, are still in exceptional condition.
- Pianos with player-piano systems made before about 2000, as their player-piano technology is now obsolete.

Keep in mind that while a piano might sound and feel fine to you, it may have significant problems of which you are unaware. It takes an experienced piano technician to know with certainty that a piano is in good condition. Often sellers who know little about pianos will claim that the piano is in excellent condition based simply on the fact that all the keys make a sound when played, and that the cabinet isn’t in rough shape. In many cases, neither a serious piano player nor his or her piano technician would agree.

You can determine your piano’s age by looking up its serial number in the *Pierce Piano Atlas*, available from piano dealers, technicians, libraries, and piercepianoatlas.com—or have us look it up for you when you use *Piano Buyer’s Seller Advisory Service*. On vertical pianos, the serial number is usually found on the metal plate, or harp, just inside the lid. On grands, it’s usually on

the plate, under the music desk. If you have a problem finding the serial number, watch our YouTube video [How to Find the Serial Number of Your Piano](#), or read our article “[How to Locate the Serial Number of a Piano](#).”

Determining the Fair Market Value of Your Piano

The fair market value (FMV) is the price an informed buyer and seller are likely to agree on, where both parties are private, noncommercial entities (not piano dealers), and neither is under a compulsion to buy or sell. (An example of a compulsion to sell is when a seller is moving and must get rid of the piano at the end of the month before the moving van leaves.)

Although, in today’s information age, researching the reasonable price range in which a particular piano should sell is becoming easier, it can still be difficult, and will rarely yield a single figure that you can use with great certainty—except, perhaps, with nearly new instruments of a few very well-known brands. Unlike real estate or cars, piano sales are not regulated, and there is no major service that tracks the actual sale prices of used pianos. Even if there were, pianos can vary so much in age and condition that finding one or more instruments that are exact matches to yours would be unlikely. Therefore, you’ll have to settle on a range of possible selling prices, and be prepared to lower your asking price as you gauge the response (or lack of response) to your initial asking price, and as whatever deadline you’re working toward approaches.



The FMV is best determined by using several sources and methods, including the classified-ad services on which you’ll probably end up listing your piano, articles in *Piano Buyer*, and online appraisal services such as *Piano Buyer*’s [Seller Advisory Service](#) (SAS). The SAS provides a solid estimate of FMV by experts, as well as tips, customized to your situation, on how and where to sell, information on donations, selling to dealers, and appraisals for insurance purposes. The piano technician who has been servicing your piano, or another technician, may also be able

to provide a value. However, many technicians do not keep up with changes in the used-piano market.

The section “[How Much Is It Worth?](#),” in the *Piano Buyer* article “Buying a Used or Restored Piano,” provides a depreciation schedule for pianos in current production, and a chart of estimated ranges of FMV for other categories of piano based on their quality, age, and condition. After reading the article and referencing the tables, you may be able to place the value of your piano within a reasonable range.



Follow this up by checking a number of classified-ad websites (see next section). Just keep in mind that the prices there are *asking* prices, which may be far higher than the actual amounts buyers end up paying. Still, if your piano is a common model, and the comparables you find all have similar prices, this gives an indication that the asking prices are probably close to the actual selling prices. On the other hand, if you’re selling a little-known brand, you may have trouble determining what a comparable brand and model might be, and may require professional assistance to determine a market value.

Everyone wants to feel that he or she has gotten a good deal, so be prepared to adjust your asking price in a negotiation. We suggest setting your initial asking price about 10–15% higher than the FMV, and accept any offer within 15–20% of the FMV.

Note that checking prices of used pianos at local dealerships is likely to be of limited value in determining FMV because the dealership usually adds significant value to an instrument, resulting in a much higher price. Usually the piano dealer has:

- tuned, regulated, and voiced the piano to perform well;
- cleaned it thoroughly;
- touched up the cabinet and polished the hardware;
- offered a warranty, backing up the purchase with the security of a business (a buyer thus risks less when buying from a business than from a private party, who, more than likely, is moving away); and

- will provide a free tuning after delivery.

Where to Advertise Your Piano

Before trying to sell to strangers, consider mentioning to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers that you'd like to sell your piano. Word of mouth among people you know results in stronger and safer contacts than those obtained from commercial listings. Also, print out and post notices where people congregate: houses of worship, schools, your workplace, etc. Send out a text or e-mail to your contact list, and post on social-media sites, such as Facebook. Be sure to include photos of your piano.

Ask your piano technician if he or she knows of anyone who might be interested in your piano. Also ask about advertising with the local chapter of the Piano Technicians Guild (PTG). Chapters often have an e-mail list of members to whom they send a chapter newsletter. Sometimes, members or their clients may advertise pianos for sale, either for free or for a small charge. You can find a list of PTG members in your area at www.ptg.org, where you can search by zip code or PTG chapter.



Classified-ad sites on which you should consider advertising include:

- Craigslist.com, localized for your geographic area, under "Musical Instruments by Owner," then search on "pianos."
- PianoBuyer.com/classifieds has an international audience with search capabilities by location. PianoMart.com is a related site with all the same listings as PianoBuyer.com. When a piano is listed on one of these sites, it automatically appears on both. A basic listing is free; premium listings, including a custom-designed banner ad on PianoBuyer.com, are available for an extra fee. You pay a 3% commission on sale if you sell through the site.



- Other major online classified-ad sites include PianoWorld.com, eBay.com, and Klaviano.com.

Tips for Selling Your Piano

There are two keys to ensuring that your piano sells: creating a sales presentation to prospective buyers, and properly preparing your piano for sale.

First, if the company that made your piano is still in business, learn the features, advantages, and benefits of your piano brand and model when compared to other pianos the shopper may be considering. *Piano Buyer's* "[Brand and Company Profiles](#)" has descriptions of currently manufactured pianos that usually include their features, advantages, and benefits, as well as the history of the manufacturer. "[A Map of the Market for New Pianos](#)", also in *Piano Buyer* will help you determine the quality of your piano relative to other brands in the marketplace. If your piano has outlasted its manufacturer, you can research the brand's history online. Weave this information, along with the history of your particular instrument and your experience of it, into a narrative that presents the facts about your piano in a persuasive context. You can use the checklist below to help you form answers to the questions potential buyers will ask, and determine how best to articulate those answers in a way that will place your piano in its best light.

- **Make:** The brand name is found on the fallboard (keyboard cover) and/or on the cast-iron plate.
- **Model:** The model designation or number is usually found just inside the lid or on the back of an upright (vertical) piano, and usually under the music desk of a grand.
- **Serial number and age:** See earlier discussion.
- **Relative quality of brand and model:** See earlier discussion.
- **Cosmetic condition:** Look the piano over closely with a flashlight and note any visible wear or damage.

- Performance condition: If you play, does the piano perform well and sound good? How will you describe its performance to a shopper. If you don't play, ask your piano technician what he or she thinks of its overall performance and how best to describe it.
- Date of last tuning or other service.
- Why you're selling the piano.

Here's a checklist of what to do to prepare your piano for sale:

- If you expect to sell your piano for over \$1,500, we strongly suggest that you have the piano tuned and its condition inspected before putting it up for sale. (An exception would be a piano that you know to be untunable and unplayable, and offered for sale only to someone who intends to restore it.) We realize that you may not want to put any more money into an instrument you're selling, but spending a few hundred dollars and a couple of hours can produce a good return in both the selling price of the piano and in the ease of sale. Keep in mind that when a piano is significantly out of tune, has notes that don't work properly, or has other obvious defects—even small ones—the chance of being able to sell it is dramatically reduced. Most potential buyers, knowing little or nothing about piano mechanics, will be concerned that the defects they see or hear are symptoms of more serious problems. By presenting the piano in its best condition, you can remove doubts and unnecessary obstacles to the sale.
- Clean the piano's case thoroughly and, if possible, touch up any cosmetic blemishes. Your local hardware store will likely have touch-up felt-tip markers that match the finish of your piano, and a brass cleaner for the pedals. For grand pianos, have your piano technician clean under the strings and inside the piano. With vertical pianos, vacuum the piano's back, and inside the bottom cavity where the pedals are attached.
- Clear everything off the lid of the piano so that potential buyers can look inside. Raise the lid of a grand piano so that potential buyers don't have to (it can be dangerously heavy).
- Clear access to the piano so that potential buyers can see the entire cabinet.
- If necessary, clean the room the piano is in, and be sure it is well lit.



Selling a High-End Piano

“You’ve got to spend money to make money.” You’ve probably heard that expression, and it especially applies to selling a performance-quality piano. The potential buyer of such an instrument will probably be an experienced player who, in a buyer’s market, will have a lot of options. It bears repeating that in order for you to get anything close to fair market value, you should have your piano thoroughly tuned, regulated, voiced, and cleaned—and touch up the cabinet and polish the brass hardware. Failure to invest in this work can keep a shopper from buying, as potential buyers will often avoid buying a good instrument with even minor problems out of a concern, sometimes subconscious, that more serious problems lurk beneath the piano’s lid.

Ask your piano technician (or rebuilder, if the piano was recently rebuilt) to provide a written, detailed report of the condition of the piano, and an appraisal of its value. If possible, obtain several such reports and appraisals. A good report and appraisal based on an onsite inspection of the instrument might cost \$150 or more, but is well worth the expense for the peace of mind it can bring to the potential buyer of a high-end piano.

High-end pianos may sell to, among others, professional musicians, such as the music faculty of colleges and private piano teachers in your area. The college’s website may have profiles of the faculty that include their e-mail addresses. You may wish to contact the faculty, offering to send them the piano’s report and appraisal. Buyers willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for a piano will usually read everything they can about a high-quality used piano before buying it.

If all else fails, check to see what local dealers will pay for your piano, which is generally no more than half the FMV. If the dealer has been in business a long time and is well known to schools and music teachers, ask if the dealer would be willing to take your piano on consignment. This means that the dealer takes physical possession of your piano, but doesn’t pay you until it’s been sold. You can expect to pay the dealer a commission of 33–50% of the selling

price when selling a piano on consignment, but the resulting loss may not be as great as it seems—the dealer may be able to get a higher price for it than you could on your own.

The Donation Option

If you have a piano of decent quality but all of your efforts to sell it fail, you may want to consider donating it to an organization in need. Keep in mind, though, that if your piano is unsaleable because of poor quality or condition, it is *not* a candidate for donation! (See the *Piano Buyer* articles “[Last Rites](#)” and “[Piano Purgatory: The Donated Piano](#).”)

Note that a well-performing instrument might provide a significant tax deduction. Check with your accountant or tax advisor about what the IRS will require to consider the donation tax-deductible. This is discussed in the *Piano Buyer* article “[Taking a Tax Deduction When Donating a Piano](#).”

Our favorite donations are to aspiring piano students who are not in a position to purchase a piano commensurate with their talent. Receiving such a donation can be life changing; however, it is generally not tax-deductible to the donor. For help in finding such a student, contact your local music-teacher association, the local chapter of the [Piano Technicians Guild](#), or local piano dealers.



Here is a list of some organizations that facilitate piano donations:

- Piano Finders: pianofinders.com
- Piano Adoption: www.pianoadoption.com
- Pianos for Education: www.pianosforeducation.org
- Society of Unique Artists: www.suartists.org
- Keys 4/4 Kids: www.keys44kids.org

The Final Curtain

If all else fails, it may be time for—brace yourself—the last rites: disposing of the piano at a local landfill. If it comes to that, you should have professional piano movers do the job—pianos are simply too heavy, bulky, and dangerous to move to subject family members or friends to the task of lugging it to the dump. Give up, too, any thoughts of salvaging the piano's parts; they have little salvage value, and disassembly is time-consuming and difficult. Burning the wood salvaged from the case can give off toxic fumes, due to the chemicals used in the finish. Even the ivory keys have no value.

Think of it this way: The piano likely brought the gift of music to many during its long life. It's time to let it go.