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3rd Edition

# Piano

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the piano keyboard

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keys and time signatures

Play melodies and hone  
your techniques

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**Adam Perlmutter**



# Piano

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# Piano

3rd Edition

**Revised by Adam Perlmutter**

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand

## Piano For Dummies®, 3rd Edition

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# Introduction

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**W**elcome to *Piano For Dummies*, 3rd Edition. Don't be nervous about wanting to play the piano; it's just a big, lazy piece of oversized furniture with a bunch of black and white keys on it. By selecting this book, you're taking the appropriate action to keep your piano from becoming a giant dust collector.

If you've never seen or put your hands on a piano or keyboard, no problem. This book starts at the very beginning and walks you through everything you need to know to tame that beast and make it sing sweet music. You'll also have fun along the way.

## About This Book

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Because you're in possession of a piano or keyboard or you have access to one, you may need this book to figure out how to play it. Or you may want to study how to read music. Maybe you already know how to play and you just want to improve your playing skills or develop your style. Could be you're interested in knowing more about pianos and their performers. Or you may need some help buying a keyboard or finding a teacher. For any of these reasons, this is the book for you.

You can use *Piano For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, as a teaching aid or just as a reference book. Even if you already know how to play music, you may run across some new tricks or techniques in these pages. If you read every page of this book and set about to play the examples and listen to the audio tracks and watch the video clips at [www.dummies.com/go/piano](http://www.dummies.com/go/piano), you'll be able to read piano music; know the names of notes, scales, and chords; understand a lot about different musical styles; and in general get a solid handle on some fundamental piano skills.

If you have a few specific questions about playing piano or want to go directly to something you've been dying to know, you'll find the part titles, chapter titles, and section headings practical and helpful. They make it easy to maneuver through the book and find what you're looking for.

**Note:** Truth be told, reading music and coordinating your hands and fingers to play musically on the piano are skills not learned in a day. It takes a bit of time and dedication. Although you may have seen or heard about methods to play the piano without reading music, this book isn't one of them. *Piano For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, follows the tried-and-true method of teaching the basics of reading notes and rhythms from the get-go. And this book aims to do all that in a simple and fun way.

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the web page.

## Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I made a few assumptions about you, the reader:

- » You like to listen to music and especially like the sound of a piano.
- » When you hear someone play the piano, it sparks something in you. You say to yourself something along the lines of, "I wish I could play the piano."
- » You haven't had any piano lessons before, or you had some lessons at some point in your life but you basically see yourself as a beginner. Either way, you'd like it all laid out and explained in a simple and easy-to-understand way.
- » If you have a piano or keyboard, you aren't playing it as much as you want to and need some help getting to the music-making.
- » If you don't have a piano or keyboard, you're considering the purchase of a keyboard and welcome some help with the whole process. Most likely, your keyboard will have at least 25 black and white keys, may or may not plug into the wall, and will cost you as much as you're willing to part with.
- » You like to discover things for yourself.

If any of these assumptions is true for you, you're reading the right book.

# Icons Used in This Book

As you go through the chapters of this book, you'll find the following friendly icons designed to draw your attention to different bits of information, from helpful guidance to pleasant diversions.



REMEMBER

Be sure to pay attention to anything that has this icon attached. As you may guess, it's something important that you shouldn't forget.



TIP

When you see this icon, you know some handy-dandy information follows that can save you time, money, energy, and more.



CHECK IT  
OUT

This icon lets you know that there's an audio track and, in many cases, a video clip that demonstrates the concept, playing technique, or song discussed in the text. Check out these online resources at [www.dummies.com/go/piano](http://www.dummies.com/go/piano) to deepen your understanding and speed your progress.



WARNING

Pay attention to text featuring this icon. You can thank me later for showing you how to avoid mistakes and problems.



WEB EXTRAS

This icon points out bonus material you can find online.



PLAY IT  
NOW

This icon suggests different music that you can play on your keyboard.

# Beyond the Book

In addition to the material in the print or e-book you're reading right now, this product also comes with some online goodies. Check out the eCheat Sheet at [www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/piano](http://www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/piano) for common musical symbols, piano fingerings, and the names of the piano keys.

You can also find several other tidbits of information online about rhythm, mode, and arpeggios. Go to [www.dummies.com/extras/piano](http://www.dummies.com/extras/piano) to read them.

You can view and listen to various techniques and songs that I discuss throughout the book. Go to [www.dummies.com/go/piano](http://www.dummies.com/go/piano) to download the audio tracks and video clips. You can also discover a list of ten additional tips for making the most of your practice sessions at this same site. When prompted, enter the username of pianofordummies and the password of wiley.

## Where to Go from Here

If you don't know much about the piano as an instrument, start with Part 1 and get to know the different types of pianos. Pianos are a wonder of the world.

If you're thinking about buying a piano or keyboard, turn to Chapters 3 and 4. They'll leave you feeling so much more prepared for the tasks of shopping and buying.

Check out the guide to reading music at the beginning of Chapter 6 and test yourself by trying to identify the elements of music notation on a page of piano music. (Don't worry, there's a key that tells you where to look for a reminder or an explanation of each element.)

Go through Chapters 7 and 8, which cover rhythms. Reading and responding to rhythm smoothly are huge components of reading music. If you can get your rhythm down, it will make all the other elements come together much more easily.

If you already know how to read music, try Parts 3 and 4 for some scales, melodies, chords, and more that fit your taste and technique. Skip around and play fun songs while you expand your knowledge. If you have trouble playing something, backtrack to where you can brush up on a particular technique.

To get an idea of the music you play as you work through this book, check out the audio tracks and video clips on the accompanying website ([www.dummies.com/go/piano](http://www.dummies.com/go/piano)) and enter the username (pianofordummies) and password (wiley). Use the audio track table at the back of the book to direct you to the written music.

# 1

## Getting Started with Piano

## IN THIS PART . . .

Find out what makes playing the piano so satisfying and what elements come together to make beautiful piano music (you're probably aware of some without even knowing it). Also check out some tips that will make your piano-playing journey a smooth one.

Take a tour inside the piano and meet the extended family of keyboard instruments. Get the lowdown on the two major players in the keyboard arena — acoustic and electric pianos — along with an introduction to the organ and the harpsichord.

Gather advice for finding and purchasing a piano or keyboard, getting one that's not only right for you now and but will also allow you room to grow as a musician.

Keep your instrument — be it a traditional piano or a digital instrument — clean, in tune, and in perfect working order.

Get to know the keyboard, what makes it tick, where to put your hands and feet, and what all those keys are for.

## 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

# Chapter **1**

# Preparing to Play a Piano

“**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 and 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 a whole bunch of people. The piano remains a very popular instrument, with the number of piano lovers 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 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.

# Knowing Why the Piano Is So Special

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 wonderful instrument:

- » **You can play many different notes at the same time.** The fancy word for this characteristic is *polyphonic*.
- » **It's a completely 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 choice for 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 studying music at the piano

The piano is an ideal instrument for studying 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 in pitch), down (lower in pitch), or stay the same.



Each key 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: oboe and tuba, to name just two), 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.

## **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 may 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.

# Understanding Why People Take Piano Lessons(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 re-create 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 — to be able to play a certain piece or 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, your 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. Be realistic with your timetable and your expectations

as you begin playing the piano. With that in mind, here are some top reasons people give up; don't let yourself fall victim to them, too:

- » **Frustration:** Mastering 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. Short but 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, you find out 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 some folks predicted that the piano would grow obsolete with the development of electronic instruments in the last 50 years, they have been proved wrong. (And hopefully 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. 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.

## Comprehending 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 already comprehend 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 discovering: how soft or how loud to play the notes, with what kind of touch you should press the key, the general tempo and feel of the music, and so on.

## 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.



REMEMBER

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.

### 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 3 focuses on melodies and scales (the horizontal parts), and Part 4 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 one 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 harmonically or melodically. Jazz developed its own rhythmic language that was completely different than anything else that came before it.

## Starting to Play the Best Way

You’ll pick up quite a lot of new skills as you read and play *Piano For Dummies*, 3rd 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.** Plenty of good music has been 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.