

Piano Appraising Guidelines

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Prerequisites:

It is very helpful if the Appraiser is a Piano Tuner, has knowledge of rebuilding pianos, and is familiar with the current piano market. Being an RPT is an advantage. Knowing how to play the piano is also an advantage.

Tools:

- *Pierce Piano Atlas* – The 11th Edition is currently available. This is used for determining the date pianos were manufactured and therefore their age.
- *The Piano Book* – by Larry Fine. The 4th Edition is current. This is a good source for general piano information, as well as guides to piano values and depreciation.
- *The Piano Book – Annual Supplement*—The latest edition gives current product information and new piano pricing.
- *Ancott Associates –Music Product Directory, Acoustic Piano Edition*. (No longer available.) Older editions are good resource material.
- A tape measure to determine the size or model piano being appraised.
- *The Piano Action Handbook* – compiled by Randy Potter, RPT for suggested action regulation specifications.
- “*G*” *Piano Works Repair Labor Guide*, by Joe Garret, is an invaluable source for calculating the number of “man-hours” required for specific repairs on specific piano types.
- *Piano Parts and Their Functions* – compiled by Merle H. Mason and published in 1981 by the Piano Technicians Guild, Seattle, WA. A working knowledge of this book is very useful.
- Appropriate appraisal forms.
- Various tools for tuning, checking pitch, tuning pin size and torque, crown, down-bearing, regulation, etc., and a good trouble-shooting lamp.
- *Identifying Woods*, by Hoadley, helps to know types of wood.

Purposes for Appraisals and Evaluation of Pianos

- **Insurance** purposes. Perhaps they just had some major work done, or it has been some time since they upgraded their insurance and they need a current evaluation of their instrument in its current condition. If they have “replacement insurance” they will need the current cost of a new piano to replace the former one in case of a loss.
- **Restoring** or upgrading their older instrument requires some information on the present as-is value to go with the cost of repairs, as well as the estimated potential value when re-done.

- **Selling** their piano is a common reason why we are called on to appraise. It is amazing how many people are in a situation where they need to sell their piano. The question is always “What is my piano worth?” *Do not answer this question over the phone without evaluating the piano in person first-hand!* An appraisal can take a good hour or more, including explaining things to the customer, so the price should be close to a tuning fee.
- **Buying** a piano in a store or private situation often produces a call for an appraisal on behalf of the buyer. This can call for some ethical tightrope walking on the part of the Appraiser. A private seller (not your client) may ask while you’re checking out their piano: “What do you think of my piano?” Or, “What do you think it’s worth?” Or a dealer may be very motivated to sell a particular piano and offer incentives. Or a buyer (your client) may be at the point of virtually “stealing” a very expensive grand piano from a naïve elderly widow who thinks that because it’s dusty and she’s had it 30 years that it can’t be worth much. And you think, “If only....” Say, “The other person is hiring me to appraise this piano, and I work for only one person at a time.”
- **Ethics** Graciously avoid conflicts by explaining that you can only properly work for the interests of one client at a time. This can go far towards defusing the situation. Story: Ethics and the Fish and Game Warden. If the RPT also buys and sells pianos personally, the piano must be appraised objectively, and not for personal gain.
- **Piano Values.** There are several legitimate levels of pricing to consider.
- **Private retail sale value**, if they are considering selling it themselves. I usually suggest that the piano be tuned up to pitch and minor repairs be made so all the notes play. There are no guarantees offered, no moving is involved, or other repairs made, etc. This is an as-is price.
- **Dealer retail value** where sales commissions, trade-ins, repairs and guarantees, etc., are involved. There may even be other perks offered, but this depends on many things. Value #2 will always be higher than Value #1 by a significant amount.
- **Consignment value** is usually a percentage of the selling price.
- **Wholesale value**, if they just want to be cashed out, is the lowest value they will get for the piano. For example, if they ask, “What if you bought it from me?” give them a price. If they balk that the price is too low, leave it at that and suggest that they sell the piano themselves. Then if they call back a month later they may just offer you your price to get the piano moved on.

(Seeing a similar piano on line or in a store is not a good way to judge the value of their brand and model piano. It is difficult for the lay person to evaluate how it looks, how it sounds, whether it’s in tune and up to pitch, its condition, and how much playing life is left in it.)

- **Develop a good appraisal form.** Use it as a guide. Follow it, and if necessary, make changes along the way. It looks professional. It looks like you know what you’re doing. It saves overlooking various details that might be important.
- Appearance

- Case
 - Keys
 - Bench
- Tuning
 - Tune the piano. This is like washing a car before selling it.
- String condition
 - “In the process of raising an old piano in pitch, part of the weakness of the piano is that it might lose some strings.” (You do not break strings; the piano loses strings,)
 - Lower pitch before cranking up, because electrolysis builds up to hold it. You can hear the ticking sound as the strings are moved. Freeing up old strings is important to avoid breakage. One way to test for corrosion is to run your fingers up and down the strings and to listen for a brushing sound. Rendering is the ability of the string to move across the bearing point and stay in tune. Look for rust particles, and check for dried dampers and for rust on the string where they contact the felt. Pianos will not stay in tune if you pull and pull and then it jumps up too far, and you lower and lower and it suddenly drops too far. When this happens, let the customer know that this tuning will probably not hold.
- **Collect your fee and leave the appraisal with the client who is paying.** If you need more time to research details of the piano, or the amount of a particular repair that might be sub-contracted out, collect your fee, and assure your client that they will have your appraisal by mail shortly. *I do not make a copy of the appraisal (to try and avoid potential conflicts of interest).* If they are selling the piano and wish to pass the appraisal along to the new buyer that is up to them. The prospective buyer may even call me with questions about certain comments I made in my appraisal. I do agree to do this for my original client selling their piano. As I have no copy to refer to, I ask the buyer to read me the comment and I attempt to explain on the phone.
 - This evaluation is an assessment of value, not an estimate for repairs.
 - If they want to share the appraisal with a neighbor, they can show the neighbor the piece of paper. It is the only copy and cannot be sold to other people. It was paid for by the client.
 - If the piano doesn’t work or qualify as a working piano, subtract what it would cost to get it up to that point. For an antique car to be a true antique, it must be road legal. For a piano to be an antique, it must function as a musical instrument.
 - Charge for the legitimate time it takes to assess the piano.
 - Sometimes an appraisal will sit with a client for several years before any action is taken on it.
 - After that, go through the estimate again, taking into account the new prices for parts and labor.

John Cooke

Grand Piano Appraisal

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<http://www.johncookepianos.com>

Customer _____ Phone () _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Piano _____ Model _____
Serial No. _____ Year of Manufacture _____
Purpose of evaluation _____

I. Evaluation of appearance

_____ A. Case

- a. Type of wood _____
- b. Style _____
- c. Finish _____
- d. Condition of finish _____ Cost to refinish \$ _____
- e. Does the case need repair? _____ Cost of case repair \$ _____

_____ B. Keys

1. Naturals (Ivory) _____; (Plastic) _____; Condition _____
2. Sharps (Ebony) _____; (Plastic) _____; Condition _____
3. Do the keys need bushings? _____
4. Other key repairs needed _____ Cost of key repair \$ _____

_____ C. Bench

1. Type of bench _____ Condition of bench _____
2. Does bench match piano? _____
3. Is there a bench cover? _____
4. Are there problems? _____ Cost of bench repair \$ _____

II. Evaluation of Tuning

_____ A. Tune the piano (if possible)

1. How does it tune? _____
 1. Pitch before tuning: A=44Hz (+/- ___ cents)
 2. Pitch after tuning: A=440Hz (+/- ___ cents)

_____ B. String condition

1. Are the strings original?

2. Are they seated?
3. Are they level?
4. Is there corrosion?
5. Do they render well?
6. Are bass strings dead?
7. Any tied or missing strings?
8. Were any of the strings replaced?
9. Other problems:
10. Cost to restring \$_____

III. Evaluation of tonal characteristics (Play the piano)

- a. Attack/Sustain (duration in seconds) on note C-6. (If too short check soundboard and down-bearing.)
 1. Struck with hammer
 2. Plucked with finger nail
- b. Decay (loud, long sustain) of treble. Does piano sing?_____ (This can be controlled by hammer voicing if there are no serious problems.)
- c. Evaluate fundamental and overtones. (Alternate plucking string and hammer blows.)
- d. What is the tonal balance? (Hard grooved hammers cause loss of fundamental tone.)

IV. Evaluation of structural areas.

____A. Soundboard

1. Type of sound board
2. Are there cracks in the board?
3. Is there glue joint separation (buzzing)?
4. Are the ribs tightly glued and in good condition?
5. Is it clean?
6. Other
7. Cost of sound board repair/replacement \$_____

____B. Agraffes and Capo bar

1. Zings
2. Sizzle
3. False beats
4. Other
5. Cost to repair \$_____

____C. Bridge condition

1. Notching
2. Bridge pins – loose or buzzing?

3. Is there "grooving?"
4. Splitting?
5. Repairs needed
6. Cost of bridge repair \$ _____

_____ D. Condition of plate

1. Is it cracked or broken?
2. Condition of gilding
3. Condition of lettering
4. Repairs needed
5. Cost of plate repair (in addition to Re-stringing, see II-B above)

_____ E. Down-bearing (+.008" < +.012" good)

C-7 C-6 C-5 C-4 Bass

Front

Rear

Total

- b. Is there bridge roll?
- c. Other problems?

_____ F. Condition of Pin block

1. Is it original? Or replaced?
2. Is it separated or cracked?
3. Tuning pin torque in inch pounds on:
C-2 _____ C-3 _____ C-4 _____ C-5 _____ C-6 _____ C-7 _____
4. Tuning pin size _____
5. Other
6. Cost to repair or replace pinblock (in addition to re-stringing. See II-B above.

V. Evaluation of Action, Touch, Hammers, Dampers, Sostenuto, Pedals & Lyre.

_____ A. Condition of Action

1. Are parts original?
2. Are there problems?
3. Approximate number of years of playing life left?
4. Were parts replaced?
5. Original type replacements?
6. Non-standard replacements?
7. If there are action problems, see "Touch" and "hammers" below.)
8. Cost of replacing action parts \$ _____

_____ B. Action Regulation Is the piano close to factory specs for regulation? _____

1. Key height
2. Amount of key dip

3. Amount of after-touch
4. Hammer blow distance
5. Let-off
6. Repetition
7. Back-checks
8. Are the keys level?
9. Do the keys need repair?
10. Condition of key-bed, felt and key pins.
11. Cost of reconditioning action/regulation.

_____ C. Evaluation of Touch:

1.

	C-2	C-3	C-4	C-5	C-6	C-7
Down-weight						
Up-weight						
Friction						

2. Are there problems?
3. Are these age-related?
4. Are these related to replacement parts?
5. Other

_____ D. Evaluation of hammers

1. Hammer condition
2. Are hammers original?
3. How deep are grooves?
4. Can they be shaped?
5. Are they replacements
6. What brand?
7. Are they the correct size and weight?
8. Other
9. Cost to replace hammers

_____ E. Evaluation of Dampers & Trap System

1. Dampers:
 - a. Do they seat?
 - b. Any ringing through?
 - c. Are dampers in regulation?
 - d. Other problems
2. Is there a sostenuto? Is it regulated?
3. Is there an Unacorda pedal?
 - a. Does it shift freely?
 - b. Is it regulated?
4. Is there a queting system? Any problems?
5. Is the pedal lyre in good condition?
6. Are the pedals worn or discolored?

7. Are the squeaks or noises in the trap system?
8. Other
9. Cost to repair Trap/Lyre/Replace Dampers \$_____

Is this a player piano? Make_____ -Model_____

1. Does player work?
2. Was it ever worked on?
3. Was it ever restored? How long ago?
4. List areas that need work.
5. Approximate cost of player repair/restoration \$_____

Overall Score: _____

Decisions:

1. Regarding exterior condition
2. Regarding tone and touch based on potential or limitations of instrument
3. Regarding other areas

Appraised Value of Piano:

1. Insurance/replacement value (based on current new prices of closest equivalent model).
2. Estimated private retail value
 - a. Estimated value
 - b. Less total cost of repair
 - c. Estimated present as-is value
3. Current value by Depreciation Method

Note: In making this evaluation and appraisal of the value, the Appraiser assumes no liability with respect to any action that may be taken on the basis of this evaluation or appraisal.

Signed_____ Date_____

John Cooke, RPT, Registered Piano Technician – The Piano Technicians Guild