

"There is something about music that keeps its distance even at the moment that it engulfs us. It is at the same time outside and away from us and inside and part of us. In one sense it dwarfs us, and in another we master it. We are led on and on, and yet in some strange way we never lose control."

--Aaron Copland

Music is an art that does not aspire to the visual. In fact, very often, we close our eyes and shut out the world when we play or listen to music. The feeling of it in our fingers, in our bodies is entirely immersive. Feelings. Those feelings that can't be neatly arranged in words, either spoken or written, find a voice in the fluidity of music. Feelings are never static. Love never replicates itself exactly. Just as no emotion is ever felt the same way twice, no piece is ever played or heard exactly the same way as it. Music reaches into the spaces that words can't touch: the ambiguous, the unsure, the ambivalent, the hesitant. The moments full of wait. The seconds that teeter on the edge of falling. Hours full of stillness. Words that lodge themselves in the throat and will not melt away. The things we cannot say. It stretches into memory, into wonder, into awe.

The piano is an ideal instrument to learn the language of music, to learn to express the otherwise inarticulable. With 88 keys, it covers 7 octaves that range from low, dark tones to crisp high notes. In any group, there's a strong chance that there's at least one person who can play. The songs sung around a piano can forge memories and bonds that will last a lifetime. Played alone, it can fill a room with echoing loneliness or soften a sleepless night sharp with longing and distance.

Unfortunately, the reality is that a piano--even an upright--requires a fair amount of floor space and they're not terribly portable. This can make playing and practicing very difficult for students and apartment owners, especially in an age when the things we use for recreation are valued for their small size and portability. Although there is no substitute for the rich, warm, elemental sound produced by the union of metal and wood, digital pianos and keyboards provide a platform from which you, the musician, can strike the heartstrings of the world.

The most important thing to consider when you're looking at a digital piano is the action of the keyboard: the responsiveness of the keys. Nothing can replicate the feel of a conventional piano, but a keyboard with hammer action or heavily weighted keys will come closest. Most digital pianos will have keys weighted as closely as possible to their acoustic counterpart. You'll want them to be velocity/touch sensitive. Can you play it loudly? Softly? The keys need to replicate acoustic responsiveness. You also want a model with a large polyphonic range to provide dense, rich texture. Look for damper pedals with varying levels of sustain. Digital pianos utilize recorded samples from acoustic pianos, so listen to the demo tracks on the keyboard. Do they sound like a "real" piano? Do the high notes sparkle? Do the low notes growl? They should. Look for a full 88-note keybed. As far as size goes, you'll typically have to choose between console and a stage sizes. Consoles are intended for home use and stage pianos are

more portable. If you're a beginner, you should seriously consider going with a stage-sized keyboard.

Synthesizers are an entirely different story. While they do have keyboards, the types of sounds that can be attained through playing them is wide and varied: they go far beyond those of a digital piano. The action on a synth will be very different: it will be much faster than a piano with little or no resistance. You may not have 88 keys: 61 key and 76 key models are your choices there. As with a digital piano, look for a wide polyphonic range: 32 is at the low end, 64 is at the high end. The main thing to look for on a synthesizer is the number and kinds of sounds or "voices", controls, filters, and effects that are available on it. Envelope controls change specified settings--usually Attack, Decay, Sustain, and Release--at set intervals, while an LFO (Low-Frequency Oscillator) creates vibrato or tremolo effects and is also used to create the dramatic ripple and wobble bass effects in techno and EDM. Filters do exactly as their name suggests: they filter out certain frequencies at a predetermined threshold, thus changing their timbre. The preset sounds and effects are going to be built into the ROM (Read-Only Memory), so if you're creating your own sounds, look for expansion slots so you can save them. Effects should include reverb, delay, chorus, and distortion: these are the most common in modern music.

For those looking for a platform to extensively build and compose on, a workstation is a step up from a basic synthesizer. A workstation is basically a portable studio, allowing for multi-track sequencing and recording. Polyphonic range should be extensive and MIDI and USB connections are a must, as are audio inputs for other instruments. You'll undoubtedly want a pitch bend and modulation wheel for note manipulation. Internal hard-drives and built-in burners are standard. The workstation is often called a "studio-in-a-box:" it contains most, if not all, of what you need to compose and record.

If a workstation is a studio-in-a-box, then an arranger is a band-in-a-box. These have many of the features of a workstation, but won't have quite as large a sound library. What they, like workstations, will have is a good selection of sampled instruments to round out your compositions and an array of styles (accompaniments) to help shape your composition. It's like having a studio band right there.