

PIANO MAINTENANCE FOR INSTITUTIONS

Not all music educators are necessarily well-versed in asset management. If your institution does not have a dedicated asset manager, your piano technician can assist you with recommendations on how to keep your inventory of pianos in good condition.

Institutions can minimise degradation and devaluation of their instruments by adopting appropriate record-keeping, regular tuning schedules and a maintenance plan that includes refurbishment and replacement, tailored to their quality and usage.

For a more comprehensive document on this subject, we suggest a careful reading of the excellent ***Guidelines for Effective Institutional Piano Maintenance***, prepared in the US by the College and University Technicians Committee and published by the Piano Technicians Guild, which you can access at the address below. Copy and paste the following to your web browser:

<https://my.ptg.org/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=67e0760f-07ef-4118-8fb1-b36c4c96ede0&forceDialog=0>

If you have any problems downloading it, please let us know and we can redirect you to the correct webpage. In the meantime, as food for thought, we list below a number of points that should be considered for a better care of institutional instruments:

1. Treat them as proper assets

- Piano replacement, rebuilding and maintenance must be built into the overall budget structure of an institution.
- Pianos represent capital value, both as an initial purchase and ongoing maintenance, as their longevity often exceeds that of buildings.

2. Recognise the purposes of instruments in an educational facility

- To provide a musically satisfying experience for students and teachers.
- To serve as a practical tool for teaching and learning.
- To be a shared resource of a high quality that individually students and teachers may not be able to access otherwise.

3. Be aware of difficulties and challenges involved with institutional piano maintenance

- Pianos that are not maintained to a suitable standard interfere with instruction, performance and the learning process.
- Pianos are shared, lack of individual ownership often leads to neglect and abuse.
- Lack of consistent and adequate replacement budgets leads to premature deterioration of piano inventories.
- The physical environment of most institutions is unsuitable for pianos. Lack of humidity control leads to drastic tuning instability which is far greater than that observed in private homes.

4. Log an inventory and keep updated records

- Standard expected from instrument: high for performance spaces, medium for teaching, low for practice.
- Type of instrument: upright, grand, concert grand.
- Quality of make and model.
- Age and current condition.
- History of maintenance work done on the instrument.

Even if you have the best quality pianos, if they are old and worn out, they will not be functioning at a high percentage of their capabilities. A 40-year-old fine concert piano is likely to have many faults including lack of tonal control, loose parts causing rattles and excess action noise, and an increase in the amount of general problems that occur.

Concert instruments need to be refurbished after 15 to 25 years – or earlier, depending upon use and requirement.

5. Prepare a suitable tuning schedule

The questions of how often to tune depends upon the requirements of the institution, the quality of instrument, the level of climate control and the usage level. Manufacturers recommendation state twice a year as a minimum tuning requirement.

- Top level: piano is kept at performance level, tuned for every performance, tuning is not allowed to deteriorate. Voicing and regulation is kept to a high standard. Reconditioning on a regular basis. Suitable for concert instruments.
- Very good: piano is kept at an acceptable musical level, monthly attention to tuning, voicing and regulation. Refurbishment as required. Suitable for light use performance/teaching instruments.
- Fair: tuning may be allowed to deteriorate, 3 or 4 tunings per year, basic voicing and regulation standard.
- Minimal: tuned once or twice a year, all keys working, no regulation or voicing.

We often come across neglected instruments in institutions, some of decent quality, that do not receive what is described above as minimal service.

6. Consider the role of climate control

- Seasonal changes in humidity and temperature play a major role in piano maintenance needs. The more extreme these changes are, the more tuning and general maintenance will be required.
- Effective climate control will greatly improve the cost effectiveness of all piano-related expenditures. Where climate control for the building is not feasible, humidity control systems can be installed in individual pianos – although they do require constant vigilance from staff to ensure they are monitored.
- Some high quality brands will void the warranty on an instrument if it cannot be kept within a 20% humidity range.

7. Prepare for inventory replacement and refurbishment

- Institutions should seek to purchase the highest quality piano available. Pianos of lesser quality require more maintenance, have a shorter lifespan, do not warrant major rebuilding and usually do not meet the musical needs of the institution. Because of the heavy use that institutional pianos receive, instruments of lesser quality are not a judicious investment.
- If you buy top quality performance instruments, they can be refurbished at a fraction of the cost of a new one, essentially giving you an extra 20 years of high level performance.
- Saving money by refurbishment performance instruments means money can be directed towards purchasing high quality upright pianos on a rolling basis.
- Avoid the case where you have an aging inventory, meaning that many pianos will need to be replaced at once. Better to have a purchasing schedule over 10-20 years to upgrade and replace before instruments get too old to serve the primary requirement to provide a musically satisfying experience for students and teachers.
- Technical staff should be involved in administrative decision-making relevant to piano maintenance.
- The purchase of new pianos may appear to be a more tangible expenditure and is often easier to present in the budgeting process, but effective maintenance is also a vital part of an institution's piano investment.

8. Think long term

Have the following in mind when preparing a long-term plan:

- Strategy for ongoing replacement of instruments.
- Schedule for regular major rebuilding.
- Plan for ongoing maintenance at a standard according to need.
- Project to a horizon of 20 years.
- Accelerated 5-year plan to bring inventory to a suitable standard to maintain.

9. Case study

The following figures and timeframes are a good example from an existing client with 25 instruments:

Type of pianos:

- 2 concert grands used for performance.
- 5 grand pianos used for teaching.
- 18 teaching/practice room instruments.

Purchase value:

- Concert instruments: 2, valued at \$90,000 and \$120,000, total \$210,000.
- Grand pianos: 5, valued at \$60,000 each, total \$300,000.
- Good quality upright piano: 18, valued at \$12,000 each, total \$216,000.

Total replacement value: \$726,000.

Tuning Schedule:

- Concert instruments: tune for every performance, touch-up regularly when not in use, budget \$2,000 p.a.
 - Teaching instruments: tune once or twice a term, budget \$6,000 p.a.
 - Practice instruments in better condition: tune every semester, budget \$2,000 p.a.
 - Other practice instruments: tune every year, budget \$3,000 p.a.
- Total tuning budget: \$13,000 p.a.

Refurbishment and replacement schedule:

- Concert instruments: new hammers after 5 years, new action after 10 years, new strings after 20 years, set aside \$3,000 p.a.
 - Teaching instruments: new action after 15 years, new strings after 30 years, set aside \$3,000 p.a.
 - Practice instruments: replace instrument after 30 years, set aside \$6,000 p.a.
- Total refurbishment and replacement budget: \$12,000 p.a.

Adding up the cost, the annual maintenance budget (\$25,000) turns out to be roughly the equivalent of the replacement value (\$726,000) spread over a useful life of 30 years, a ballpark figure easy to remember. A timeframe such as outlined above is helpful for budgeting purposes, even if the actual work may vary to suit the quality, usage and need of individual pianos.

10. Final observations

Understandably, not all institutions are able to maintain their pianos at a reasonable standard due to financial constraints, but it must also be noted that by failing to do so, they become liable to a larger replacement expense when the asset is no longer valuable enough to justify the maintenance cost. Or worse, having the asset decommissioned and not replaced.

We often see pianos of decent value neglected to the point where they need replacement at a higher cost than they could have been properly maintained for. This is not a desirable situation, as other crucial benefits are also wasted in the process - remaining in good condition for the entire duration of their useful lives, and retaining some of their market value for resale.

If your institution is large enough to have a Finance Manager or an Asset manager, you should be able to obtain from them some general information on how to manage an inventory, or access to your organisation's policies for assets. Otherwise, if someone is in charge of maintaining buildings, fleet or IT equipment in your institution, they might be able to share their knowledge and experience with you.