GETTING STARTED

PIANOS

It might seem an odd statement, but the piano is a relatively modern instrument. Woodwinds, drums, and strings have been part of human history for millennia, but the piano dates from the 1700s. There were earlier stringed keyboards—such as the spinet and virginal—but these were small, quiet instruments with narrow tonal ranges. The harpsichord is louder and more versatile, but its strings are plucked making a dynamic mixture of soft and loud (“piano” and “forte”) notes difficult to achieve.

Italian Bartolomeo di Francesco Cristofori developed the first “soft and loud” string keyboard, and his pianoforte began a series of innovations that continue to this day. Modern acoustic pianos include very high-quality wires that are hit with a hammer, a resonating soundboard, and pedals to dampen and sustain notes. The range of creativity and expression that these innovations offer makes the piano one of the most popular musical instruments in the world.

When shopping for a piano or keyboard, first consider the number of keys you require. Serious amateurs will get the most out of a full 88-key keyboard, but smaller varieties are available, a good idea if space and portability are an issue. Another consideration is how “weighted” the keys are. Generally speaking, the closer the “action” (or the feel) the keys are to the real thing, the more expensive the instrument. If you plan to start on a digital keyboard and work up to an acoustic, your first instrument should emulate an acoustic—size, key weight, and foot pedals.

Digital pianos and keyboards come with a dizzying array of functions, some of which are very useful for the beginner (metronomes and lighted keys) and some of which are aimed at the professional (recording “workstations” or banks of classic keyboard sounds). Find a music store with a sales staff willing to help you find the piano or keyboard that, not only fits your budget, but also your musical taste and your space and noise considerations.

TRY THIS: SIMPLE FINGER EXERCISE

“Five finger exercises” are short phrases that repeat through a scale. After ascending through a whole octave (see diagram), the pattern is reversed, descending to the starting point. For this example, your hands should be in the “full C position.” Practice the right hand first, then the left, and combine both hands when you gain confidence. Start slowly at first and use a metronome to control your rhythm as you play faster.