

Unofficial Yamaha Piano Buyer's Guide

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I'd like to start off with some quotes starting Larry Fine who is the author of "The Piano book"

"Pianos that have been reconditioned or rebuilt by a competent piano technician and are in excellent condition are actually better than new ones, carry a similar guarantee, and cost almost as much."

And...

"If some of you get the idea that buying a piano is likely to be a dreadful experience, unfortunately, some of you may be right. Faced with a shrinking piano market and increasing competition, some salespeople resort to tactics that are quite irritating, if not downright unethical. There are also some great piano stores around; the difference between the two can be breathtaking."

And now a couple of quotes from the piano forums at www.uk-piano.org. The first is from a piano technician who is complaining about a piano that one of his clients had bought.

"[...] £2,000 plus delivery for a 4-year old Yamaha C110A that was below pitch and with sticking keys. Its real value was about £1,200 since they were readily available for £1,600 new. In this case the dealer convinced the client that it was "around £3,400 new."

Another piano technician then posted a reply saying:

"I know a dealer who sold a 15 year old Yamaha upright for £3200 because someone was happy to pay for it. I told him outright that I was appalled because the person could have bought a brand new one for less. He smiled and said "that's business!"

I've shown you those quotes to highlight how important it is to arm yourself with accurate and relevant information to enable yourself to spot the best pianos and walk away from everything else.

Buying a piano is a huge decision. Hopefully in the next 10 minutes time you'll be in a stronger position to avoid making any expensive mistakes.

Quick reference page - a brief summary of each question

New Yamaha vs Used Yamaha?

New pianos can be bright and loud. Reconditioned may suit you better.

Should you buy a piano without visiting the showroom first?

If you trust the dealer and can pay on delivery it could be OK

Can a reconditioned Yamaha pianos have a silent kit fitted?

Yes, it's a straight-forward process and the results are very impressive.

What are the differences between the U1 and U3?

The U3 is 10cm taller, has longer strings and a larger soundboard

Small pianos are often poor quality.

Aim for pianos that are 130cm tall. Avoid anything below 121cm

Is it important where a piano was made?

Japanese pianos are high quality. Avoid pianos made with cheap labour

What makes an expensive piano higher quality?

"Better raw materials, more exacting tolerances and stricter standards"

What age of Yamaha piano should I go for?

I recommend 1975-1995

Is a new B1/2/3 better than a reconditioned U3?

Aim high! The B series are entry level. The U series are professional grade

How can I trust a dealer to look after me?

Email every question that pops into your head. See if the dealer remains patient and helpful.

Some pianos have a German name but Chinese manufacture

Halt! Dies ist nicht die reale sache!

What about the Yamaha P series?

They used to be made in England but are now made in Indonesia.

Green issues

Buying a reconditioned piano doesn't cost the earth.

Is it true that some new pianos have plywood soundboards?

Yes. Always insist on a solid spruce soundboard.

Will a piano fit inside my front door or up our staircase?

99% of the time, yes. It is very rare that a piano delivery fails.

Are Yamaha pianos too bright?

If you choose the right model, the sound is smooth and rich.

Do imported Yamaha pianos suffer from humidity issues?

We've imported hundreds of pianos from Japan and we think it's a non-issue.

What are the U30A, UX30, U30BL, YUX models all about?

They are upgraded and experimental models aimed at the Japanese market.

Do Yamaha pianos hold their value well?

Yes because lots of people are clamoring to buy them and prices are rising

Should I take my piano teacher with me when viewing pianos?

It would be better to bring a piano tuner but a piano teacher can be helpful too



I've been asked hundreds of questions like this since I opened my piano shop back in 2002 and the following pages contain my answers to some of the most frequently asked ones. I will also quote from "The Piano Book" by Larry Fine which is a 244 page book that deals with all aspects of buying a new or used piano.

I'll now give full length answers to each of the above questions. Here goes...

How does a new Yamaha piano compare with a used Yamaha piano?

The main differences would be that the newer ones I've played were sometimes brighter and louder sounding. The newer models often have a "soft fall" lid that won't trap your fingers and the action (keys) seems slightly heavier (which some people like).

I have found that properly reconditioned U1 and U3 pianos (and similar models) from the 1975 – 1995 period have a nice rounded tone, they are not too shrill and the action is not too heavy which makes them perfect for tackling fast passages of music and ideal for young fingers too.

When you are in the piano shop it can be easy to think that the louder piano is the best one but when you get the piano home to a smaller room and you are playing for longer periods of time, that extra volume can be a nuisance.

When people visit my piano shop to test my pianos I usually advise them to play their favourite passage of music as quietly as possible and then as loudly as possible to make sure they feel in control of the keys at all volumes. It can be very difficult to play some new pianos as softly as you would like.

This issue is also raised in Larry Fine's book several times:

"Many pianos today can be played only loud and louder."

And...

"The biggest comment from all my Yamaha clients is 'can you make the thing quieter'"

And...

"[New] Yamaha verticals tend to be bright sounding, sometimes even brash, and they get even brighter with use."

So be careful about that one! Don't automatically assume that newer is better, make sure you give the reconditioned pianos a fair try.

Should I buy a used Yamaha Piano without viewing it first?

In an ideal world you should always visit a piano before buying it. However, if your local shop is overpriced (or you have no local shop) then it is no surprise that many people turn to the internet looking for high quality pianos at sensible prices.

Never ever buy a cheap piano without playing it first because the quality is such a gamble. Higher quality models such as the Yamaha U1 and U3 are more consistent so you might think that you are less likely to get stung. However, that is only half of the story. You need to make sure that the piano has not had a hard life and that the dealer has done a proper job of reconditioning the piano. Otherwise you may have to arrange for costly reconditioning work in your home.

I've made a step-by-step guide for customers who want to buy a piano without visiting our showroom. You can read the guide here: <http://bit.do/novisit>

Can a used Yamaha U1 or U3 piano have a silent system fitted?

Yes we can fit a PianoDisc silent system to any of our Yamaha pianos which converts the piano to a fully acoustic piano that also has a digital piano built into it. Flick and switch and the hammers are prevented from touching the strings and you listen instead through the headphones. It's a really good system and we have many happy customers who have chosen this optional upgrade.

For more details on this please visit <http://bit.do/silentpiano> or search online for "Mark Goodwin Pianos Silent System".

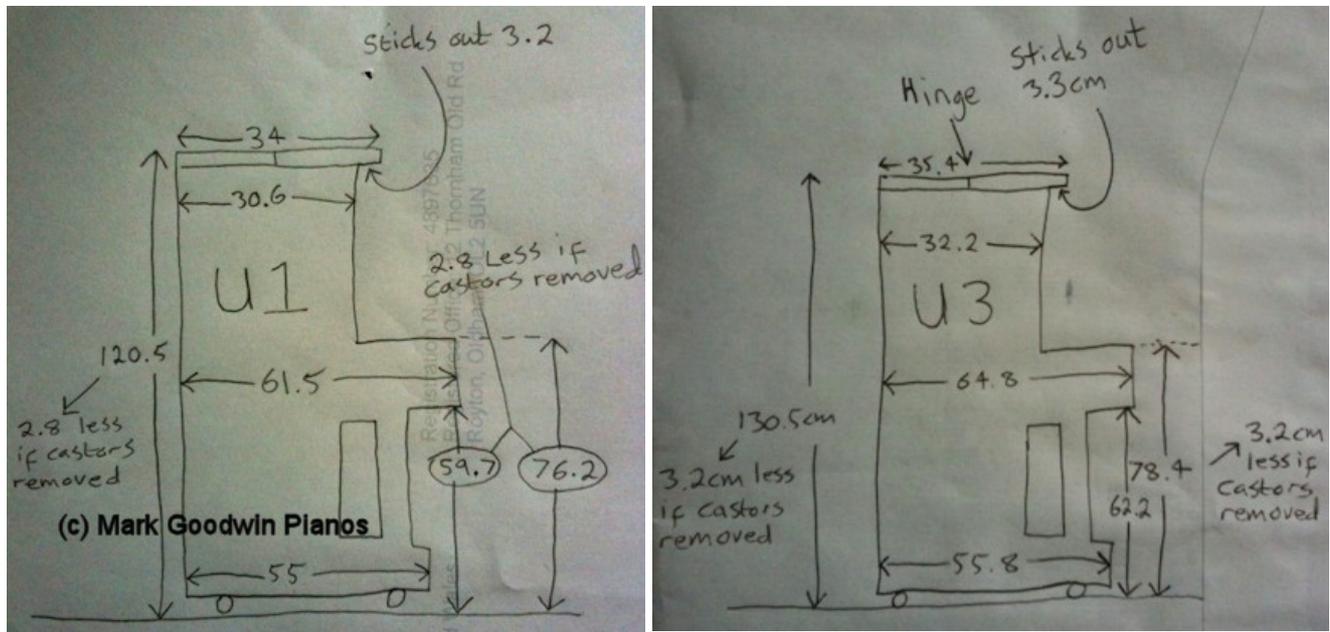
What is the difference between a Yamaha U1 and a Yamaha U3?

This is a very common question with a very simple answer. The U1 and U3 are both built to the same high standards in the same factory in Hamamatsu, Japan (although I understand that new U1s may now be made in other factories around the world whilst the U3 is still made exclusively in Japan). The build quality is identical, the components are of equal quality, the skilled labour is of the same high standard.

The only difference is that the U3 is 10cm taller which allows it to house longer

strings and a larger soundboard. The longer strings give it a smoother, richer tone (especially in the bass where it is much warmer) and the larger soundboard gives the U3 a sound quality that is better than many grand pianos.

The soundboard is the voice of the any piano – it's job is to amplify the vibrations that are transferred from the strings, through the bridges and into the soundboard. The larger and higher quality the soundboard is, the better sound will be created.



My sketches are really scruffy, I'm sorry. I should have used a ruler! Does anyone out there reading this want to create a CAD version of this for me to use in this document? If so I'd be very grateful.

Is the size of the piano important?

When a customer chooses a small piano it is usually for practical reasons. They are putting size ahead of musical quality on their list of priorities. This has a direct affect on build quality and sound quality. Larry explains it very well below:

"The size of a piano is probably the single most important factor influencing its tonal quality. The longer strings, particularly in the bass section of the larger sizes of grands and verticals, results in greater resonance of tone and in a harmonic content that is most pleasing to the listener. The smaller the piano, the worse the tonal quality, especially in the lower bass, and also in the tenor, just above the bass. An additional factor, though, makes the question of size even more important: because the tonal quality of small pianos tends to be poor, the people who buy these pianos are usually more interested in the styling and looks of the case than in the quality of the instrument inside the case. Therefore, manufacturers invest more of their money in the appearance of the instruments than in its quality. The result is that, quite apart from any effects of acoustical laws, smaller pianos are often more poorly built than larger ones."

So if you want to buy a small piano and you are wondering whether it is high quality, the answer, by default, is usually "no". For the above reasons I would recommend that you buy a piano that is around 130cm tall, or if that really is too

big for you then I recommend at least 120cm tall.

Here are the dimensions of the most popular pianos from Yamaha's current range:

Model	Height	Width	Depth
B1	109	148	54
B2	113	149	53
B3	121	152	61
P114	115	151	55
P116	116	152	58
P121	121	152	60
U1	121	151	61
U3	131	153	65

You can see that only one of the 8 models is above 130cm in height and that is why it is so popular. A well known girls boarding school bought nine U3s from me to go into their practise rooms. A quick glance at my [customer feedback](#) page shows how many of my customers went for a U3. There are plenty of music industry professionals on that list including piano teachers, pop musicians, recording studios etc. They know that musical quality comes first and so they avoid compact pianos.

Manufacture location: Where are Yamaha pianos made these days?

Things used to be simple. Steinways were made in Germany, Kemble were made in England and Yamaha were made in Japan. But now we have Steinway producing pianos in Japan and China (their Boston and Essex lines), Kemble have moved all production to Indonesia and Yamaha have factories in several countries including Japan, China and Indonesia. The name on the front of the piano no longer indicates the manufacture location.

Yamaha's top of the range pianos such as the U series uprights and the C1, C3, C7 etc grand pianos are still made in Japan but the B and P series uprights are made in other countries including Indonesia. Yamaha's concert grand piano, the CFIIS, is made in Japan and has a price tag of over £100,000.

Let's see what Larry Fine thinks about Japanese pianos:

"In Japan, engineering is a highly respected profession and factory management is elevated to a high art. The Japanese factories are among the most automated anywhere, and Japanese pianos are among the most uniformly made. This precision, and the intelligence with which the pianos are designed, especially for servicing, are the chief assets of Japanese pianos.

By contrast, here is Larry's comment on the Chinese and Indonesian pianos that have flooded the UK market:

"Whilst many of these instruments are now acceptable, the quality is far from uniform or consistent, and the majority require extensive adjusting by

the importer or dealer. Occasionally, large numbers of instruments have had to be returned for repair. Prospective customers should be reminded that these are, at best, entry-level pianos and that they have little or no track record. [...] Chinese and Indonesian pianos are not yet suitable for most purposes.”

He continues...

“Chinese pianos are improving, but are still only barely satisfactory and have little in the way of track record, [a technician commented that] ‘they tend to have a fairly cheap sound, lacking in fundamental’ and ‘they tune Okay, but it’s not a satisfying musical experience.’”

Why is a new Yamaha U3 so much more expensive than a new Yamaha B1?

At the time of writing the RRP for the U3 was getting towards £9000 and the B1 was getting towards £3000. Why such a difference in price? Here is what our friend Larry has to say about the general question of piano prices in relation to quality

“Just what makes a well-made piano more expensive? Briefly, good pianos require better raw materials, which are prepared to more exacting tolerances and subjected to stricter standards of quality than materials in lesser pianos. Sometimes a great deal of expensive material (such as wood, felt, or leather) that does not conform to these standards is rejected or discarded. In both design and workmanship, much more time and attention is paid to details that might otherwise plague the owner or technician later.”

The most important advice you can ever follow when it comes to buying a piano is to avoid anything that has been cheaply made. For many people a piano is the 3rd most important investment they will ever make (after their house and car) so it's important to get it right.

There are approximately 18 tons of pressure being exerted on the various structural elements of the piano and if this structure is not of the most robust quality then things start to move, creak, crack and go out of tune. So your focus must be placed on build quality before all other factors.

To quote Larry Fine,

“If you can’t afford to buy a reasonably good-quality piano now and you can’t arrange a loan or credit plan, then save up for the piano that you want rather than temporarily settling for a poor one. A poor quality piano will cost you more in the long run for maintenance and repairs and will rob you of your enthusiasm.”

How do you use the serial number to date a Yamaha piano?

Here is a list of serial numbers and corresponding ages of Yamaha pianos that were made in the Japanese factory.

122,000 – 809,000 / Made in the 1960s

I've never enjoyed playing Yamaha pianos from this period. They don't sound

great and they don't feel great. Some shops stock these because they can buy them relatively cheaply. We prefer not to stock these and we try to stock younger models. Our customers often drive for several hours to see my pianos and I would hate to disappoint them with pianos that I didn't feel were up to standard. So I try to ignore these pianos and I recommend you do the same. However, if your budget only stretches this far then they are worth considering.

978,000 – 1,943,000 / Made between 1970 – 1975

These pianos can be very good but you need to be completely satisfied that a very thorough reconditioning has taken place. You can usually see/feel/hear the quality picking up as you get closer to 1975 so you might get away with a nice one from one of those years but ideally you should look towards the “golden era” of 1975 – 1995 (approx).

1,943,000 – 5,300,000 / Made in 1975 – 1995 “The Golden Era”

Now we're talking! Yamaha pianos from this period are bought by piano shoppers who have done their research, steered clear of Chinese piano, resisted 1960s Yamahas and are drawn to the famous “Golden Era” of Yamaha piano manufacture. The bass section is warm and smooth, the middle section is full of warmth and energy and the treble section is crisp and brilliant but without being thin or tinny.

You are left wondering how all of this is possible in something made from just iron, wood and felt. The answer of course is no secret, it is the result of using only the best raw materials and the most skilled workers.

The “Golden Era” 20 year period is not set in stone and in practise it should also encompass pianos built 4 or 5 years either side of those dates.

5,300,000 – 6,000,000 / Made from 1995 – 2000 and beyond

If you have a higher budget you might also consider the excellent pianos found in this period. Expect to pay a premium as they can be quite rare and often you will find upgrade “X” models (U3X, YUX, UX etc) in this age range as Yamaha experimented with different materials on pianos that were aimed at Japanese professional pianists. For more on these alternative models please visit <http://bit.do/U3Variants> for a full break down.

Is a brand new Yamaha B1 / B2 / B3 upright better than a used Yamaha U1 / U3?

I'll let Larry take the lead with the question. He makes the following general point:

“[Pianos that have been] reconditioned or rebuilt by a competent piano technician and are in excellent condition are actually better than new ones, carry a similar guarantee, and cost almost as much.

My personal opinion is that a properly reconditioned U1 or U3 from the mid-70s through to the early/mid 90s may be a better option than a B series piano. If possible, try to visit a shop who can show you a new B1/2/3 sat next to a fully reconditioned U3 and see what you think.

You should also consider the fact that brand new pianos can be quite volatile and

still have a lot of settling down to do. For this reason, it can be hard to make them stay in tune and you may notice problems developing within the action

According to Larry;

"Most [new] pianos required at least four tunings in the home during the first year of ownership. An inexpensive piano that is not tuned enough in the factory, even if tuned by the dealer, may go disastrously out of tune in your home and need several remedial tunings (paid for by you) before it will even begin to hold its tune."

Here is more from Larry on new Yamaha pianos:

"The factory preparation of Yamaha pianos [has] declined somewhat in recent years"

And...

"I would suggest having all the action screws tightened in Yamaha verticals after 6 months or so of use to avoid the clicking sounds caused by loose flanges and, sometimes, by a loose letoff rail."

And...

"A small number of Yamaha consoles and studios [small pianos] had keys that were so severely warped as to make levelling and regulation impossible."

This time regarding new Yamaha grands...

"Many technicians complained about the tone quality of some Yamaha grands. The 5ft 3in GH1 and GP1 were both heavily criticised for poor tone and for tuning difficulties due to poor scaling."

Thankfully, it is very nice to hear that the Yamaha U series pianos are still being made to high standards. Here are some technicians' comments about the Yamaha U1 as quoted in Larry's book:

"The 48" model U1 is still considered by many to be one of the best values amongst pianos. "...an absolutely gorgeous piano to tune, play and listen to," wrote one technician. "Flawless!" wrote another, "Easy tuning – still my pick of the litter!"

And...

"A leading piano trade magazine (The Music Trades) writes: "Whilst Russian pianos are undeniably cheap, they are generally of such shoddy quality as to be virtually unsalable at any price."

The advice is clear. Don't buy a budget piano! A reconditioned U1 or U3 is far better and costs a similar amount.

How to choose a good piano dealer

In my opinion, the best way to find a safe person to deal with is to ask them lots of question before getting anywhere close to confirming a purchase. Email them and ask how and why they got into pianos in the first place and ask lots of questions about any of the pianos that you are considering purchasing. You will get a good feel for the characters in charge of the shop by doing this. It is also a good idea to ask all of your most cheeky questions and see what answers you get. If you manage to ruffle the dealer's feathers and they get impatient with you then perhaps that is a sign of things to come. Could you trust the after-sales care of someone who became impatient with you even before they had your money?

You might also find a better level of service by visiting a smaller, independent shop rather than a large, high street chain store. The small, independent piano dealer has not signed any deals with manufacturers or distributors. They can stock whatever they like based on quality, not price. They have no targets and no obligations other than to pay their rent on time each month.

German branding but Chinese manufacture

A new trend amongst cheap piano manufacturers is to claim that their piano was designed by a German engineer or that it was built "in collaboration" with German piano makers. These claims are vague and of little consequence because the end result is still the same poor build quality and poor component quality. Here's Larry:

"An increasing number of companies – especially Korean and Chinese – hire "German" scale designers or engineers with German-sounding names to redesign their pianos. Although they may make improvements, the instruments will still retain many, if not most, of the limitations of the original, unimproved version."

So be wary of any new pianos with European-sounding names. Always ask "Where was this piano made?"

What about a new P series Yamaha upright? Are they a better option than a used Yamaha U1 or U3?

The P series are smaller than the U series and used to be made in England in the Kemble factory but that has now been moved to Indonesia. The P series are currently being made in Indonesia. At the time of writing a new Yamaha P121 will cost £2500+ more than a reconditioned, Japanese-made Yamaha U1.

Green Issues

You are probably familiar with the phrase "throw-away society" which refers to our obsession with buying things so cheap that we don't mind throwing them away once we've used them a few times. Well, I've come to the realisation that the brand new "sub-£3000" upright pianos are the latest items to be added to the list of disposable products. I won't harp on about green issues because each person has their own take on that debate but I would think most people agree that buying a used piano is more environmentally friendly than paying for a brand new piano to be manufactured.

Here is Larry's take on the green issue:

“There are good reasons to buy a used piano. Since the average life of a piano is around 50 years, and with proper restoration at least fifty more, recycling older pianos makes ecological sense.”

Don't buy a piano with a plywood soundboard.

Here is a quote taken from the uk-piano.org forum where piano technicians meet to chat about the piano industry:

“The defining factor about the B series is they have plywood soundboards. The salesman will tell you it is 'laminated to withstand changes in temperature and humidity' but the fact is it's plywood and I think most people can hear the difference when it's next to a 'normal' piano with a solid soundboard. Yes, it brings the price down (manufacturing a solid soundboard is tricky and expensive), but surely people want a piano with a pleasant tone.

Here are Larry Fine's thoughts on the use of spruce for piano soundboards:

“Soundboards are traditionally made of a solid sheet of quarter-sawn spruce, Spruce is used because it has a fine, straight grain, is strong and resilient, and reproduces the sound of the strings better than any other material. It is also used in violins and other fine stringed instruments.”

When a piano manufacturer uses a plywood soundboard for one of their models it may be an indication that the model in question is a budget piano and musical and mechanical quality was not a primary concern.

The Yamaha U series have solid spruce soundboards, the Yamaha B1 has laminated plywood soundboards. Top quality spruce is getting more scarce and expensive all the time so it is no surprise that more and more of the cheaply made pianos being produced by many manufacturers are now made with plywood soundboards.

Case study about buying a new piano

Whilst writing this buyer's guide I've received the following email.

“Do you have a C1 used grand? I just had a bad experience with a brand new grand that thankfully was returned and the money refunded. Now realised ya get what ya pay for. It kept dropping out of tune two weeks after it was tuned! They accepted it was faulty and offered to replace but after advice I declined. I have my heart set on a C1 either new or used but it really is tight re funds. I realise there is no point buying cheaper versions so want one now lol.”

I'm not going to state what brand the above piano was because I don't want to land myself in any trouble but suffice to say it was made in China with a German-sounding name on the front. “Ya get what ya pay for”. I couldn't have said it better myself!

Will a piano fit inside my front door or up our staircase?

Pianos are big, heavy objects but we have always been surprised that even a nice, big Yamaha U3 will fit around most corners, into most rooms and up most staircases. You can make a cardboard cut out of a U1 or U3 using the diagram found elsewhere in this buyer's guide and then slide along the floor and turn it through your various doorways. If you can manage it without touching the walls then a piano will indeed fit.

I've made a page displaying a list of stairjob cases studies that our piano movers have either successfully completed or they have told us it isn't possible. You can see that page at: <http://bit.do/stairjobs>

Are Yamaha pianos too bright?

Smaller, cheaper piano can sometimes be too bright and thin sounding but this is certainly not true of the larger, superior models. The Yamaha U3, for example, has a very smooth rich tone.

We usually have around 50 Yamaha U1 or U3 pianos in stock and we find that some are mellow, most are somewhere in the mid-toned range and the odd one is bright. You should choose a mellow piano if you have a small, hard room. Choose a bright piano if you need the sound to fill a particularly large room (choir rehearsals for example). For most people the mid-toned Yamaha U3 is the most appropriate choice as it is mellow enough to play very softly but still able to handle those *Fortissimo* passages.

A Yamaha U1 tends to be brighter than a Yamaha U3. The U3 has that extra depth and smoothness of tone whereas the U1 can sound like it has a bit more attitude to the tone which can often make it more suited to jazz or pop where instant, bright sounds are often more desirable.

Another general rule to work by is that a younger Yamaha piano is sometimes perceived as being brighter than the older ones. I prefer to stock Yamaha pianos from between about 1975 up to the mid-1990s as I find them to have a rounded and balanced tone.

Customers often ask me to choose a piano for them and I will always ask what type of room the piano is to go in and providing that the room isn't too hard or too soft then I will recommend a nice, mid-toned Yamaha U3 for them.

I've started to make a huge list of video recordings of our pianos and have created separate lists of Bright, Medium and Mellow sounding pianos. You can see the latest list of recordings at www.yamahau3.co.uk

Do imported Yamaha pianos suffer from humidity issues?

The claims are that Yamaha have manufactured certain batches of pianos in a certain way depending on what part of the world they are going to. The main claim revolves around the different humidity levels of the various parts of the world with Japan considered to be more humid than much of the USA for instance.

However, when you start to look within each of the countries and continents you realise that humidity levels swing wildly from one region to the next. In the USA for example you've got Washington, Florida and Texas with humidity levels up to 83% but on the opposite end of the scale you've got places like Nevada and Arizona with humidity levels down towards 30%. You will also find significant differences in humidity and climate for many countries across Europe but I don't see piano manufacturers claiming that they "Season for destination" for each individual country in Europe.

I've stocked several hundred imported Yamaha U1 and Yamaha U3 pianos and I'm very happy to report that there has been no evidence of any humidity-related problems appearing in these pianos. We have a long line of happy customers who are happy that they took the route of buying a reconditioned Yamaha piano.

What are the U30A, UX30, U30BL, YUX models all about?

They are upgraded and experimental models aimed at the Japanese market. These are upgraded Yamaha U3 variants designed for the Japanese domestic market which has more demanding professionals. These pianos were more expensive when new and used upgraded materials and experimental design features. The X in any model means that the piano has an X-Shaped frame around the back of the piano. Yamaha has since phased out this design, apparently because it was too expensive. I've written an exhaustive list of alternative upgraded models along with some research and analysis. You can visit that page here: <http://bit.do/U3variants>

Do Yamaha pianos hold their value well?

Yes they hold their value very well. Any new piano will quickly plummet in value as most new items do. A reconditioned Yamaha piano will hold its value as long as you buy a popular model. That way you can guarantee that lots of people will be looking for that same model when you are ready to sell it on in the future. For the past 4 or 5 years Japanese pianos have risen sharply in price due to exchange rate shifts and shortage of supply in Japan. The pattern is likely to continue which will make it easier to achieve a high selling price for your piano in future. If you don't want the hassle of finding a buyer we can sell it for you in our showroom on a commission basis. See here: <http://bit.do/sell4u>

Should I take my piano teacher with me when viewing pianos?

A piano teacher can be a helpful 2nd opinion and you can stand back and listen whilst they play. Just bear in mind that piano teachers usually have very limited knowledge about piano reconditioning so you might consider bringing a piano technician instead. You are welcome to bring any piano teacher or piano tuner to our showrooms to help reassure you of the quality of our pianos.

THE END! Please email me and tell me how you would improve this guide.

If you have any questions just ask: mgpianos@gmail.com

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