

The Square Grand



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When we look at a grand piano, we see a distinctive set of curves that has been the established shape for over a century. If we look back to the early to mid 19th century, when the modern piano was first being developed, we can find a variety of shapes and sizes. One particular shape that was popular for decades was a rectangular shape that we refer to as a square grand piano. When covered by the lid, this piano looks exactly like a large table. Some of these square pianos were built to also serve as a desk or table when not in use for musical endeavors, something many people today would not dare to do in fear of ruining a valuable finish or the internal mechanism.

The firsts of this style of piano appeared in England and France. At that point, the mechanism, referred to as the action, was still extremely simplistic and was able to be produced easily. Because of this, it was in close competition with harpsichords and many who owned

harpsichords also were able to have a square grand. This new invention, the pianoforte, was set apart by the fact that it has a dynamic range (could play loud and quiet) unlike the harpsichord, making it quite popular.



The square grand started small, not more than a few feet long with about five octaves available. As time went on and composers experimented by writing music with a more expansive pitch range, the instrument grew in size. By the later half of the 1800's, these pianos were as large as 3 feet by 7 feet standing around 3 feet tall and containing 85 to 88 keys. The cases also became more and more ornate: carved legs, detailed molding around the rim edges, and even brass or gold statues imbedded in the wood on the most expensive models. The structural and internal designs became more complex as well: a steel plate was added around the 1860's to help support the increased string tension in a never ending quest for more volume and projection. This plate also helped reduce "cheeking" of the rim, a condition a piano may develop where the string tension actually causes the case to warp and twist. Not to worry, this condition was entirely eliminated in pianos by the development of the cast iron plate/harp we see in all modern pianos today.

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The square grand was especially popular in the Americas continuing into the 20th century while Europe had greatly refined the upright piano and was no longer interested in squares. Due to its massive size and weight and difficulty to be serviced by a technician, not to mention its simplistic action that did not allow for fast repetition, the square piano died out by the early 20th century and was overtaken by the grand pianos we see today. There are still some squares out there that one may happen upon. Servicing squares has become a specialty within the piano technician community because of its rarity and requirement for special tools and study for effective service. I am a big fan of working on square pianos and have a great appreciation for early pianos.