



The Spirit of the Piano Part 2: In the Key of Sea Major

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There are no limits to where people bring pianos. They can be found anywhere on the planet, the ocean being no exception. There are many examples of artistic representations of pianos found living among the fish just off the coast, one of the more famous being a statue of a mermaid gazing at the instrument while resting on the sand near the bench. They can be found on ships and boats of all sizes, making sure no sailor is forcibly deprived from the excitement of a piano sea shanty.

In the 1800s, a new style of piano was created for the tightest of spaces and doorways. Ships and boats were not the monstrosities they are today and space was used conservatively. Of course, this did not keep away those wishing to play the piano. A popular piano design which came to be known as the “yacht piano” was a small upright piano with a fold-in keyboard. There were no electric keyboards that could be hidden in a closet at that time, so innovation ran rampant. It was not generally marketed as a “ship piano” because the companies did not want to box themselves into a single use design, but they were exhibited as a piano for gentlemen’s yachts and the saloons of steam vessels. The action functioned much like the modern upright piano action and was more reliable than a spinet action (which was not invented until the early 1930s). Some of these pianos were more ornate than others depending on who owned the yacht, but they all managed to serve the crew well.



As ships grew and reached the size of the cruise ships we have today, a small piano became less important and a larger, better quality piano could be used. In the ballroom you may find something even as large as a nine foot long concert grand. The Titanic had five ornate, art-case pianos ordered from Steinway London and produced in the Hamburg factory. Wow! The modern cruise ship pianos are pounded on for many hours almost every day meaning they get about as much use as college practice room pianos. They also experience other challenges such as salty sea air and drinks spilled on them. The rocking movement of the ship requires the pianos to be bolted down to the deck or to the wall if it's an upright. Due to the sophistication of modern player pianos, many cruise ships use these instruments as background soundscape instead of hiring a pianist for every performance. In any case, if there's a will, there's a piano.

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In an absurd challenge, a Youtuber named Joe Jenkins found a way to play "Under the Sea" on a piano underwater. You can view the video at <https://youtu.be/JRkluUDAirE>. As you can imagine, this was no easy task for many reasons. Pianos are made of wood, felt, leather, paper, and metal. Except for the metal, all of those materials swell and fall apart when submerged in water. He spent significant time and effort to find a piano, a Lindner, with a plastic action that would not be affected in this way and would still function under these extreme conditions. Sound does not travel underwater like it does in air inspiring Joe to add metal tacks to the tips of the felt hammers to produce a brighter sound that could better travel through the medium. After creating a somewhat "water-safe" piano, he threw on some scuba gear, dropped the piano in the ocean and played us the tune from the popular Disney movie. And thus, piano history was made.