

# **Piercing The Cloud of Confusion**

## **Questions & Answers about Previously Owned Yamaha & Kawai Pianos**

Question: **Where are these pre-owned pianos built?**

Answer: Each and every piano we import was built in Japan. Contrary to some rumors, they were not made in Taiwan, China, Korea or somewhere else in Asia.

Question: **Where in Japan do these pianos come from?**

Answer: Everywhere! Our Japanese associates consistently search the country for pianos that meet our specifications.

Question: **Will these pianos, having been manufactured in Japan, develop physical problems when brought to the United States? Also why do Yamaha & Kawai dealers sometimes bring up the "grey market" controversy?**

Answer:

1. Emphatically no! Neither Yamaha nor Kawai ever ran two production lines. The pianos they have built are all the same, and have been shipped to every corner of the world. Serial numbers are in consecutive order, no matter the country to which the piano was sent. Parts for the pianos we import are interchangeable with those sold by Yamaha Corporation of America, based in Buena Park, California.
2. Yamaha & Kawai dealers and factories find themselves in a quandary: They cannot afford to imply that their older pianos have defects. Neither can they imply that any of their pianos new or used, have built-in obsolescence after twenty years or so. Since used instruments properly reconditioned are as close to new quality as possible, they are a threat to the sale of brand new models. Intelligent, selective buyers will choose a restored instrument for their child, Church or school because of the cost differential and the quality.

The high qualities of used Yamaha & Kawai pianos provide the attributes that are sought after by musicians at a cost of c. 1/3 of new. So as a last resort a "grey disinformation" conversation is started to frighten a customer into buying a new piano rather than a fine used instrument. This is unethical behavior.

Question: **Didn't YCA have some dryness problems with cases and pin-blocks when they first imported pianos from their Japanese factory? How can I be sure of a used piano?**

Answer:

1. Yes, but only in the very first shipments. Within the first few months, production changes were made to avoid future problems. You should never buy Yamaha/Kawai pianos made in the early 1960s unless you are a piano rebuilder.
2. You can be sure of a used Kawai or Yamaha if it has been built after 1970. Any competent technician can check serial numbers. And any competent technician can check tuning pin tension, action operation and case integrity. It is not "rocket science" to make sure of the condition of the piano. Add a musician to the test and if it plays well and sounds well you are ok. Some dealers will give as much as a 10 year warranty to used Kawai and Yamaha. They are that good!

Question: **Aren't the climatic conditions in the United States different from those in Japan? If so, isn't it possible for these pianos to "fall apart" in this country?**

Answer: The United States experiences a wide variety of weather patterns, just as in the rest of the world. No where is there such diverse climatic variation as in this country?

Question: **Yamaha Corporation of America refers to these pianos as "gray market", being distributed by "non-authorized wholesalers representing these pianos to be of a similar quality as regular Yamaha instruments". How do you respond?**

Answer: Webster defines "gray market" as "A place or system for selling scarce goods secretly at above prevailing prices, a practice considered unethical although legal." I am not selling "gray market" goods, nor do I operate in an unethical manner. The price of pianos varies with age, general condition and model. Price can be affected by natural wood cases vs. high polish ebony finishes, scarcity of a particular model or other price factors such as delivery and warranty. This is so for new pianos as well.

Question: **Please explain "Seasoned for Destination". How does it relate to the pre-owned pianos?**

Answer: In the United States, every conceivable climatic condition can be found, from the high humidity of Miami and Houston to the dry cities of Phoenix and Denver. San Diego is totally different than Akron, Boston or Minneapolis. You will find used Yamaha & Kawai

pianos in virtually every city in the country, serving the purpose for which they were purchased! It is impossible for any piano manufacturer to "season for destination" and by doing so "determine the moisture content of the wood for the market for which it is "destined", as recently stated by a Yamaha of America executive!  
Mass confusion would result in the piano market due to the constant moving of families and their pianos world wide and to different parts of the U.S.A. with different climates. Warranty shops would be overrun with complaints. No such chaos exists.

Question: **Are used KAWAI or YAMAHA pianos imported here by their American affiliates?**

Answer: Definitely yes for Kawai; possibly (but we have no proof) for Yamaha. One might suspect a double set of standards!

Question: **What kind of warranty can be expected?  
What is the dynamic of retail price vs. used restored price?  
What is the price stability of a used Yamaha or Kawai Piano?**

Answer:

1. Used piano warranties are the responsibility of the selling dealer. As a general rule, manufacturers do not provide warranties except for the original customer.
2. When a new piano is purchased, the difference between wholesale cost to the dealer and the selling price is applied to store overhead, sales commissions, warranty, transport etc. This is why you cannot expect to sell the new piano for the price you paid. It becomes a used piano and the value drops to the intrinsic value of the instrument in question. The newer the piano the higher the "street" values until at some point it stabilizes to approximately 1/3 of the new price. This of course varies with condition and model. A used piano that is 20 years old, in pristine condition or restored can be expected to retain almost 100% of its residual value as long as it is kept in top condition.
3. In the case of a used piano, once it has been sold new, the dealer mark-up has been erased and the piano settles into its intrinsic value. This value, in the case of Yamaha & Kawai instruments, is stable for decades after it was sold new. This assumes top condition, both case and mechanical parts. This is why you can purchase a factory restored used piano and sell it yourself years later and recover close to 100% of your investment, sometimes more.

Question: **Why do many Yamaha and Kawai grand pianos have only two pedals? Does this indicate the piano is, indeed, a "gray market" piano?**

Answer: No! Two-pedal grand pianos were, since Cristifori days, the choice of piano builders throughout the entire world, except in this country, where people insisted on having a middle pedal. Probably only one out of one hundred people have any idea what this pedal does, let alone even know how to spell the word sostenuto.

Question: **When did the Japanese Yamaha and Kawai factories decide to discontinue production of pianos with only two pedals?**

Answer: Kawai discontinued two-pedaled pianos in about 1973. Yamaha followed suit about 10 years later. Both companies informed their world-wide customers that, in the interest of more efficient production, all grand pianos would have three pedals - thus a large cost savings!

Comment: Victor Borge, world-famous pianist and entertainer, has said over and over again, "The middle pedal only separates the left from the right!"

Question: **What about a crack in the soundboard? Does it affect the tonal quality?**

Answer: Most likely many, if not most, used grand pianos have at least one or more cracks in the soundboard. This is especially true in more expensive instruments, those that use the better grades of Sitka, Adirondack or European solid spruce. Provided the crown of the soundboard remains intact, the odds of tonal change is highly unlikely.

Question: **How do you define, and/or establish that a true crack exists in a piano?**

Answer: Such a crack is open to the eye from the top, clean through the board. If this is the case, either a business card can be slid through, or light from a flashlight can be seen from bottom to top. Most "cracks" are totally harmless! They can be repaired at a cost that is probably out of proportion to the result.

Comment: Do not confuse a so-called crack with a minor seam separation, or a pressure ridge known in the trade as a *menori* (a Japanese term). The latter two conditions are quite common, having absolutely no adverse effect, other than cosmetic. Please note that seams act as expansion joints, thus allowing for very slight openings to appear under extreme dry periods, no matter where the piano may be in use. When the humidity level increases, these insignificant openings will disappear!

Question: **What is your company's policy regarding restored Yamaha & Kawai Pianos?**

Answer: Each and every piano we import was built in Japan. Contrary to some rumors, they were not made in Taiwan, China, Korea or somewhere else in Asia. These pianos are selected with the following criteria: 1. Newest available, 2. Proven top models, 3. A+ ratings on finish and all internal parts.

We have never had any problems with Kawai & Yamaha instruments. Should there be a problem we would know about it during preparation and the piano would be returned to our supplier in Japan at their expense and another piano ordered. Should a problem develop after a sale, we will repair or replace the instrument.

Our customer satisfaction is 100%! We have never had to repair or replace any Kawai or Yamaha restored or used piano.

Question: **What are the models that are most requested?**

Answer: Most customers prefer the 52" professional uprights. For space considerations, the continental consoles which are pedestal instruments with no front legs. In grand pianos, the most popular are 5' 10" polish ebony w/artist bench.

Question: **How often do pianos need tuning? Is it better to buy an original condition piano?**

Answer:

1. Once per year or more often under heavy usage.
2. If you can find an original condition Yamaha or Kawai piano that has been kept tuned, regulated, clean inside and the finish kept like new, and all parts are working up to standard, then buy it. On the other hand it is unlikely that pianos newer than 10 to 15 years old will be on the market in a large enough quantity that would enable a buyer to easily "go get one". Here and there will be trade-ins at a store and pianos less than 5 years old will be expensive and rare.

Question : **Are restored/ rebuilt / refurbished pianos preferred vs. original condition?**

Answer: The terms above are somewhat interchangeable. Professionally refurbished pianos are a grade level below rebuilt, which is a grade level below restored. Original condition pianos are also called "as is". In a full restoration, ALL parts are replaced. In rebuilds and refurbishing some parts that are in excellent condition are not replaced. In any case there is always a final precision regulation that is done. In the case of Kawai & Yamaha pianos, restoration generally means: refinish, replace worn parts, new keys, some or all strings, damper felts, key bed felts, and regulation. There must be some cross-over between terms since a full restoration carried out to its logical conclusion would necessitate replacement of all parts down to the smallest screw or pin. This would not be cost effective and is not necessary.

A professionally restored Yamaha or Kawai will always play better and longer than an "as is" piano. The terms *restored*, *refurbished*, *rebuilt* have been attacked by dealers in an attempt to down-play the excellence of restored Yamaha and Kawai pianos for obvious reasons...they lose new sales as a result.

I would rather have a beautifully restored piano than a 20 year old "as is" piano. Think of the comparison of a car. Would you rather have a 20 year old Corvette or a restored 20 year old Corvette? If you have ever seen and driven a restored 20 year old Corvette there is no question as to which you would choose. The same rules apply to pianos.

On the other hand if you are a collector of pianos and don't care to use them as musical instruments for practice, performance or teaching, then by all means find an original "as is" piano and put it in a glass case. However most people buy pianos to use, to play and develop their musical skills. A restored piano will play correctly giving your child a decided advantage as a student.

Question: **What about drying out in general.**

Answer: **DRYING OUT?**

Just for fun, ask someone connected with Distribution or New piano Sales...well, of course you'll be warned about "Grey market" instruments - those overseas imports with possibly "*different engineering*" known to "*cause problems in the past*" - or drying out which "*may*" occur and might be "*a bit of a worry*" because some pianos were designed for the Japanese market. AGREED. Indeed they *w - e - r - e!* Forty or fifty years ago. Once upon a time...before Japan's spectacular technological revolution, before exports, back in days when anything labeled "made in Japan" was considered undesirable by the world at large.

Question: **What is the history on the so called "Grey Market" Piano?**

Answer: **GRAY MARKET PIANOS? ( GREY MARKET PIANOS )**

Clearly, until Japanese makers could start getting themselves taken more seriously, there'd be little thought of serial numbering for specific regions - because where you're living, there obviously wasn't any market yet! In any case, I'm not advocating the purchase of some "OLD" Yamaha or Kawai or Toyo from post war Japan. Most imports are late 70's onward and by then, most models were certainly much improved.

During the late 1970's I saw brand new models being delivered. None were second rate - all fulfilled all our expectations and more. For the price, they were great instruments and with each upgrade they just got better. As mentioned earlier I own Yamaha and Kawai instruments, and am happy to recommend both types of pianos.

**A BIT OF A JOKE?**

Isn't it interesting that today I'm still servicing, tuning and playing good old pianos made early in the 20th century. And wouldn't you know it? Certain ones of these feature blurbs about having been manufactured "*expressly for the Australian climate*" - or specially designed for "*Hot conditions*" or "*Cold Climates*". Yeah...right. People are expected to believe anything!

It's a known fact (we're told) that brand X toothpaste is now used by more Dentists than any other toothpaste (Shouldn't that be "... any other profession"?)

And be on the lookout for that famous line, "I would be careful of this type of piano because of problems with the square wheels." Yes, people will believe anything.

Final  
Comment:

Having been around pianos since I was three, I have continuously heard about Steinway as the epitome of pianos. This came after a time when Steinway & Son's marketing had been in full swing for more than half a century. It was such an effective marketing campaign that people in America thought that any grand piano was a "Steinway". This is attributed to American marketing expertise. In fact there are certain older generations that still think like this. The common statement, "Well, don't you think it is time to get a Steinway for the living room?" is still spoken here and there. Such a rude awakening is due when these shoppers go to the Steinway showroom and find that for about \$35,000 they can get a small Steinway grand piano...maybe, or an upright.

After further shopping they find other brands that offer "lifetime" warranties, and 50 year soundboard warranties, and all the hype and disinformation and just plain old non-information that is used to sell pianos. Then there comes the real "junk" pianos from countries trying their hand in export and the piano trades.

As for me, I have found that my dream piano would be Boosendorfer at about \$250K and my second choice would be between Steinway, Yamaha and Kawai. In the full concert grands (9'+), Any of these makers are superb. In looking further and playing many pianos, I came across the restored Yamaha and Kawai market. I can tell you without any reservations that ANY pianist, teacher or student would love these pianos. They play cleanly, crisply and tune wonderfully. They hold their value and are so much in demand by musicians and teachers that, like Steinway, the common by-word for a fine used piano is becoming Yamaha or Kawai.

What more can I say. Let those who have eyes see and those who have ears hear...and let those who buy them have more money in the bank.

Discussion **A reprise of the controversy over seasoning and climate**

Like you, I had been hearing different stories from different (potentially interested) parties. Dealers of new Japanese pianos seem to have one position, and dealers and wholesalers of used (so-called "gray market") Japanese pianos another.

I decided to call Yamaha Corporation of America in Buena Park, CA and see what they had to say.

As a result of this inquiry I discovered that apparently, yes, there are different seasoning procedures for Yamaha pianos destined to be sent to the U.S., and different parts of the world.

I also have a request into Kawai for information regarding this same issue. Hopefully, I will get it sometime...they do have a blurb on their website. I did, however, get a good deal of enlightenment from Yamaha on this subject. Incidentally, the Yamaha spokesperson's biggest frustration, really, was that more people don't call them directly to get the "real" story. I understand, though, how some people might be reluctant to do so, because, similar to the way they may view the local dealer, they also may not consider the manufacturer to be completely impartial or candid. However, Yamaha seemed very willing to share the inside story and set the record straight.)

According to the Yamaha representative, there are indeed three different lines, or "processes" in the Yamaha production facilities, which he referred to as "wet," "dry," and "super dry." However, in addition, there are other significant differences between the pianos that are destined for the U.S. or Japan, or other countries, including such things as different stringing scales, and different hammer types.

The pianos that come to the U.S., he indicated, are from the "super dry" process or line. One of the major reasons for this is, he said, is our widespread use of both central heating in the winter, and air conditioning, in the summer, both of which tend to dry out the air, making for a more "arid" climate. (As opposed to Japan, where "open air" is more the mode.) Pianos destined for Japan (and Asia in general) are taken from the "wet" line, since Japan is an island and tends to be more on the tropical or humid climate side. Pianos destined for say, Europe, are taken from the "dry" line. (Of course, there are many nations, and many different climates, and the actual assignments (internally, at the factory, that is) of which pianos come from which lines is probably more complicated, he acknowledged.)

The fact remains, however, that, just like Asia or Europe, the United States actually has many different climates and even "micro-climates" within relatively small geographic areas. Our climates run to both extremes (arid and humid) and the whole spectrum in-between. It is also difficult to understand how any piano manufacturer can compensate in advance for all possible climatic extremes that a piano might encounter. I suggest there are a few factors that should be kept in mind while contemplating how (and if!) this can possibly work:

- 1) Any piano, no matter how well its wood is seasoned, will ultimately have problems with warping, failed glue joints, loose tuning pins or soundboard cracks and/or compression ridges if exposed to an extreme enough climate. A piano whose lumber is seasoned or dried to a very low moisture content can have just as many problems if it ends up in Florida or the deep South (or other places in the U.S. which can get very humid) as a piano whose lumber is dried to a higher moisture content, and then sent to the Mojave Desert or one of the arid states such as Arizona or New Mexico.
- 2) No piano manufacturer can completely prepare a piano against humidity fluctuations or extremes it may encounter. A major factor of how a piano survives through the years is the amount, or degree, of care exercised by the piano's owner in protecting the instrument from extreme or adverse climate conditions. For anyone really serious about maintaining their piano in optimum condition, they should look into climate control systems for the instrument. (This may not be necessary if the person lives in a moderate climate where the humidity remains at a fairly constant median level. In either very dry climates or very humid ones, though, climate control should be considered more essential.)
- 3) New pianos "specially" prepared for the U.S. market can easily end up in worse shape than a used piano that was originally sold for and in Japan (which later ends up in the U.S.), simply because of adverse climate conditions, or lack of proper care in the home, regardless of what the outdoor climate is. And due to the wide range of climates we have here in the U.S., it is possible that, under certain conditions, a piano that was originally seasoned for the Japan "climate", might be better off here than one that was targeted for a "dry" U.S. climate (which "dry climate" is far from universal, or even the rule here.) If Yamaha's objective, on the other hand, was targeting a theoretical indoor climate, represented by frequent use of air conditioning and heating, and a well-insulated home where the windows and doors are often kept shut, then they should be made aware that, just like in Japan, many Americans also believe in "open-air" living; and also many don't have air conditioning, like to keep their windows open, and/or rarely use the heater.

4) People do move to different parts of the country, and sometimes out of the country. They often take their piano and other furniture with them when they move, and pianos are frequently very treasured possessions. If Yamaha prepares the U.S.-targeted pianos for a dry climate, does that mean that people who buy such an instrument can't subsequently move it to a humid environment, and will have to leave it, store it, or sell it? I'm sure that if this came out it would definitely make it less attractive for someone to buy a Yamaha piano, and I doubt that Yamaha, (or any other piano manufacturer for that matter), would support this idea, although it is implied by Yamaha's paradigm of different climates needing different seasoning procedures.

5) While manufacturers often like to think they have control over, or can predict, how the wood in their pianos will respond to different climates where they may be sent, the reality is that there is much about wood that is still not well understood, even by people who are very experienced with it. Facts and figures about drying wood to certain moisture contents with a target humidity or environment in mind may sound convincing to the lay person, and be fine in theory, but in the real world wood usually has a mind of its own, and tends to behave however it pleases, so it often defies predictions about how it will react to certain environments. For this reason certain vital parts of a piano are expected to, and frequently do, change dimensionally within a certain anticipated range: any piano tuner can attest to the fact that the soundboard crown goes up and down, and tuning pins become tighter or looser in the block due to seasonal humidity changes. Other parts of a (well-built) piano are designed to compensate for dimensional changes, so that any swelling or shrinking of wood components can be contained, allowing the piano to still function normally. All this has come to be expected, as a result of many years of experience building pianos. To suggest that a piano's wood can be controlled, even with local humidity control devices, or any sort of factory pre-seasoning procedure, so that it does not expand or contract at all, is unrealistic.

6) There are several things about the construction of pianos that tend to mitigate the effects of humidity changes on the wood. The fact that there is a thick polyester or polyurethane finish on most Japanese pianos, that tends to seal the wood off from, or protect it from extreme or sudden humidity changes, and the fact that the piano's soundboard and pin block are usually also coated with some kind of finish, both help to keep a piano's wood more dimensionally stable. (It is true that no finish completely seals wood off from humidity changes, but certain finishes can provide substantial insulation.) In addition, much of the wood in a piano is laminated, so that layers of wood overlaid over others help restrict or restrain each other from much dimensional change in the areas that matter. Even a piano's soundboard and pin block are laminated. All these things may help explain why the "gray market" pianos (ones originally seasoned for, and intended for the Japan market and environment) have survived much better here than anticipated.

The Yamaha rep verified that there were problems with some of the first Yamaha pianos to be imported to the U.S., due to (according to Yamaha) seasoning problems (i.e. the wood not being dried enough at the factory for our climate), back around 1960. He also indicated, however, that Yamaha went to great lengths and expense to rectify the problems, often going so far as to send factory engineers and personnel out to the problem pianos to ascertain the causes and repair the instruments, ultimately ending up replacing the tuning pins in thousands of instruments. In 1963, the three different seasoning processes were reportedly instituted at the factory.

[Note: Communications from Yamaha Corporation of America regarding the "problem" pianos that were first sent to the U.S. in the early 1960's, (when Yamaha began exporting them here) seem to focus on loose tuning pins being the main source of difficulty, and state that most of those pianos sent here suffered loose tuning pins within the first couple of years. Officially this was attributed, by Yamaha, to be due to their engineers being unaware of the level of dryness that existed in the U.S. Yamaha contends that the dryness was due mainly to indoor conditions: the result of insulated houses, heating and air conditioning drying out the air in which the pianos were kept. Yamaha's expressed concern was that some of the pianos originally intended for the Asian climate (so-called "gray market" pianos that are currently being bought used in Japan and exported for resale in the U.S.) might exhibit problems similar to those first brought here in the 60's, before Yamaha's engineers had experience producing pianos for so-called "dry" climates such as ours.

The way the pin blocks and other wood in these 60's vintage Yamahas were seasoned may actually have been only part of the problem, or not as big a problem as it initially seemed. Over the years, many piano technicians have observed that Yamaha tuning pins seem to be somewhat looser than what they have come to expect in new U.S. pianos (especially ones made by Baldwin, which in recent years have had a reputation for having very tight pins). It is possible that this contributed to the initial complaint, as this may have been many technicians' first exposure to Yamaha pianos at the time. Unfortunately, we are not told how loose the pins were in these first Yamaha pianos to

be shipped here. Many assume they were not tight enough to hold the piano in tune, but this may not have been the case at all. They may simply have not been tight enough for the U.S. technicians, who very likely would have been the ones to first bring the problem to Yamaha's attention.]

To listen to some of the opposition to the "gray market" instruments, you might get the impression that these pianos would literally fall apart upon arrival here or shortly afterward, with soundboards caving in, pin blocks delaminating, and cases warping. Such has not proven to be the case. Incidentally, Yamaha's warranty relief for these pianos brought over in the 60's, that developed loose tuning pins, (and according to Yamaha there were thousands of these pianos) was simply to replace the tuning pins with oversize ones, a job that might take a technician or competent factory worker a day to complete. -No mention of soundboards or pin blocks being replaced, or pianos being sent back to the factory. Are these pianos still here? Yes. Are they still being played? Yes. Are they in any worse condition than pianos later "specifically seasoned for the U.S. climate? Not from anything I have seen.

I will be add more later on this subject as I learn more, but perhaps this will help to answer at least part of the questions. So yes, from what I have been able to ascertain, there are currently definitely different wood seasoning and/or construction procedures used in the Yamaha factory for pianos intended for different destinations. Whether or not there is anything that could be construed as representing one universal "dry" climate here in the U.S., or whether the different Yamaha seasoning procedures are truly effective, or necessary, are entirely separate matters. It would be interesting and helpful to know to what moisture content, exactly, the wood for the different pianos is dried, and to what range of climate humidity Yamaha feels the pianos would best be suited, so that piano owners and potential buyers can have some idea about the ideal environment for their piano, rather than just being issued a blanket statement (assumption) that "these pianos are best for U.S. climate," -which, for reasons previously stated, is really far too broad a generalization. We have many humid climates here, some even bordering on the tropical, and it is simply not true that a piano pre-seasoned for an arid environment will do equally well in a humid one. In addition, piano owners have the choice today of several effective humidity control systems, and are much more knowledgeable about the effects of humidity and environment on their instruments than in years past. In my opinion they could definitely benefit from knowing in which circumstances they would need one for their Yamaha.

It is true that Yamaha makes different piano models with different stringing scales and features for different world markets, ostensibly because of different cultural preferences in piano tone and styling, among other things. (This is also true of Kawai). Again, we have the difficulty here of cultural stereotypes: i.e., Yamaha's U.S. piano buyers *all* live in a dry environment and *all* like one certain type of piano sound and one certain type of piano style, so we will build *all* our pianos for them a certain way (when put that way it begins to sound rather incredible, doesn't it?)

If you don't enjoy being lumped in a group with everyone else, or stereotyped, it is possible you might actually prefer a Kawai or Yamaha that was intended for a different market than the U.S. I have played many pianos that were originally intended for Japanese consumption, whose tone I actually preferred over the U.S. targeted models. In this sense, Yamaha & Kawai may end up with much the same problem that Steinway has had with its Hamburg models, trying to keep the two markets separate. It is interesting to note that with the Hamburg Steinways as well, the rumor was that they would fall apart upon arrival here, not having been intended for our climate. But you would have to talk with a dissatisfied U.S. owner of a Hamburg Steinway about that, and so far, I've yet to find one.

Overall, my sense is that, based upon what I have seen from appraising, repairing, rebuilding and playing numerous pianos of both types over many years (both "gray-market" as they are called, and pianos originally intended for sale in the U.S.), the different seasoning processes are simply not as great a factor in the overall longevity of the piano as some dealers of new Japanese pianos would have you believe, especially given the fact that we have so many different climates here in the U.S. While proper seasoning is very important in the building of a piano, I truly haven't seen any of these so-called "gray market" pianos that have simply "fallen apart" upon arriving here; or, for that matter, any that have shown any problems other than what are common to used pianos everywhere. The major factor in how pianos survive, in any climate, seems to depend much more on how owners take care of them after they have left the factory.

P.S. Incidentally, the Yamaha spokesperson indicated also that if you call or e-mail them with the serial number of the piano, they can tell you the original intended destination of the piano, whether U.S. or Japan.

I have been reflecting on some of the ramifications of this idea of attempting to season

piano lumber differently for different climates. It seems it would be a good idea if indeed the manufacturer knew precisely what type of humidity the piano was headed for; but as previously stated, here in the United States we have so many different humidity conditions and climates that it would seem almost impossible to account for every circumstance.

For instance, one of the most critical areas of a new piano, as far as seasoning, is the wood used for the soundboard. Generally the soundboard is "baked", or dried to very low moisture content before installation in the piano, lower than anything the piano (hopefully) would encounter in any intended destination. The reason for this is because the soundboard must maintain a certain curvature or "crown" as it is called. If, after installation and/or shipment to its destination the soundboard continued to lose moisture content, or shrink, there is a danger that it might lose its entire crown, and the piano would lose a good portion of its tone quality. Hence, most manufacturers today tend to "over dry" or "over shrink" the board slightly, before installation, in order that the board will swell up again after installation, and hopefully maintain that curvature for a reasonable length of time (many years). Because the soundboard is restricted within the walls of the piano's case or rim, any taking on of moisture or expansion after installation will increase the curvature of the board, as the board has no place else to go. (This is somewhat of a simplification, but it is true in general.) In other words, if push comes to shove, the manufacturer would rather have the soundboard swell up (curvature increase) after installation rather than shrink (curvature decrease). As we all know, soundboards are going to eventually lose crown over the long run any way, (and pin blocks lose their grip on tuning pins) as the wood continues to shrink ever so slightly over many years, so it's really all just a matter of time.

Now imagine that a manufacturer envisions sending his piano to a moist or wet climate. Perhaps he tries to compensate by not drying the soundboard to as low a moisture content, for fear that it would swell up too much after installation, and get, at the worst, undesirable things such as compression ridges and rib separations, even step fractures (similar to what the earth does when there is a fault), if the wood decides to swell beyond it's capacity. (Which is something that has happened on some new pianos, even of finer make, when the manufacturer baked the soundboards a bit more than they should have)? On the other hand, if for some reason this same piano were sent subsequently to a very dry climate, the soundboard might continue to dry out and shrink, possibly creating cracks and loss of crown.

Now if a manufacturer envisions sending the piano, on the contrary, to a very dry climate, and dries the soundboard down to a very low moisture content before installation, lower than the dry environment he foresees sending the instrument to, then if the piano indeed ends up in a dry environment, all very well and good; but what if it ends up in a more humid or damp environment? Compression ridges and step fractures are almost certain to appear, as the board tries to swell back up more than its elastic limits; and in the worst case, the board may even crush itself in places or warp away from its ribs. (I have actually seen this on a certain high quality U.S.-made concert grand where the lumber was "super dried" at the factory, and then the piano delivered to a more humid locale.) In the pin block, if it becomes swollen with excessive moisture, you may end up with tuning pins that are too tight, and which may actually break when attempting to turn them, or be so hard to turn that it is impossible for the tuner to tune the piano.

Now every piano tuner is aware that soundboards do shrink and swell with the seasons; and with the turning on and off of heating and air conditioning at various times of the year (unless the home is equipped with some very sophisticated humidity control).

How in the world CAN a manufacturer compensate for all the possible destinations a piano might find itself in? What might be the best way to season this soundboard? Perhaps neither low nor higher moisture content, but some sort of in-between median?

And what about humidity control? Is it possible that a certain amount of seasonal flexing of the soundboard is actually beneficial, and helps it maintain its flexibility? Or is it best to keep the soundboard from swelling or shrinking at all?

It seems that, like Yamaha, Kawai in the past had different seasoning procedures for pianos intended for different world "climates" (at least 2 different lines, it was reported to me). I was also told, however, that Kawai has recently decided to discontinue the different seasoning procedures and have only one seasoning process, the same as most of the world's other piano manufacturers. If this is so, it casts some doubt on Yamaha's insistence that pianos need to be seasoned differently for different destinations, because Kawai, also, targets its pianos not only for Japan but for all the world, and is a maker of some of the world's highest quality instruments.

Some of the complications of trying to target the seasoning of pianos for different areas

of the world. Again, we have to stipulate between "indoor" and "outdoor" climate. The outdoor climate may be one thing. Indoors, because of central heating or air conditioning, it may be another. It may well be that the "indoor" climate is much more of a concern to piano manufacturers than "outdoor."

For example, what if the piano is seasoned for, and shipped to a wet climate but later ends up in a dry one? (-within the 10 year warranty period). -Or is shipped to a home that's in a wet outdoor climate, but where the indoor climate is very dry because they run the heater (air conditioner) all the time? On the other hand, if a piano manufacturer anticipates a dry or arid climate, what happens if the piano is sent to a home in arid environment generally, but inside the home it is very humid because of a high water table near or under the house, or a swimming pool nearby, or because the family takes lots of showers and boils pasta in an uncovered pot every night for dinner. Suppose in either case the owner of the piano subsequently calls up the piano company and says "my piano tuner says the soundboard on my piano has lost its crown (due to excessive dryness) or- "my tuner says the soundboard has compression ridges and has buckled away from the ribs in places" (because of excessive moisture). Then the owner may demand warranty relief, and what's the piano company to do? Whose fault was it? The piano manufacturer's, for not being able to accurately prophesy where the piano would end up? Or the owner's, for not taking into consideration what might happen when moving his piano from a wet to a dry climate, or vice versa, or the effects of central heating and air conditioning, or the other factors discussed above?

Apparently piano manufacturers have chosen to address this problem in a number of different ways. Some recommend the use of piano climate control, such as a Damp Chaser Humidity Control System. Others have opted to install "laminated" soundboards with plywood type laminations rather than solid spruce planks joined edge to edge. These "laminated" or "plywood" soundboards are much more immune to cracking, warping, or loss of crown from humidity fluctuations. (But many pianists feel there is a compromise in sound quality with these boards.) Different types of pin blocks with different kinds of laminations have been tried as well, some more impervious to moisture than others. (Tuners often say pianos with these types of pin blocks are more difficult to tune, however.)

Most piano manufacturers seem to have opted for only one seasoning procedure for their pianos, a sort of median somewhere on the spectrum between "wet" and "super dry." It seems they have either found a happy medium, or else have thrown in the towel on trying to target pianos for different climates, (much of which is out of their control after the piano leaves the factory), and the small number of pianos with problems resulting from being outside the range of proper seasoning can be absorbed by the warranty program.

However, all piano owners should be made aware of the effects of humidity fluctuations on their instruments. It remains a problem to be addressed, both by the piano industry, and consumers.

After all of the information has been surveyed and tested against experience and actual hands on use of pianos, both those "made for" the US market and those "made for" other markets, we find the following conclusions:

1. There have been attempts to season pianos for specific markets by the major piano manufacturers across the globe.
2. These efforts can be seen in products by Steinway, Yamaha, Kawai and to some degree other makers.
3. The ambiguity lies in the ultimate success of these strategies which is contradictory at best and appears to make little difference in the life of a piano at the worst.
4. Ultimately the question resolves itself based upon quality of the piano and its price. If you want an excellent piano at a fraction of the price of new the used / restored Kawai and Yamaha is an excellent choice. If on the other hand you want to pay triple or more for the "correct" piano and sleep better, then by all means do so.
5. The realization that ALL pianos eventually "come to dust" and everything eventually "falls apart" is a great leveling observation. One that must be weighed against cost vs. quality.

#### Synopsis

In selling Kawai and Yamaha pianos I have never had a problem with any of them. I choose very carefully and if I feel that there is a obvious problem, I will send the piano

back for an exchange. The only comments from customers are praises for the piano and how well it plays.

Minor adjustments are always going to have to be done from time to time. Major failures just never happen. And IF one did...don't you think I would take care of my customer? Certainly I would!

At the bottom of this my intuition is that both companies feel the competition of their very high quality used pianos and have attempted to create a "cloud of unknowing" in the mind of prospective piano buyers. Certainly the manufacturer of other products could do the same with the contradictory data surrounding any process of manufacture or quality control. But we find that most manufacturers of goods throughout the world do not have the time or interest in creating ambiguity about their products. Most companies strive for excellence and are prone to tout the excellence of their earlier products as a history and proof of quality. Spending time spreading a cloud of distrust over earlier products of a high quality item would seem contradictory. Steinway certainly would never do that! One wonders why Kawai or Yamaha would want to have even the most remote controversy over the quality of their products out in public view.

I can't speak for all but as far as my customers are concerned, both companies have made a gross error in attempting to intimidate and psychologically maneuver them into buying new when used is what they want....**and** they want it because it **is** a Yamaha or Kawai! I ask, "Who coined the term: *Wisdom of the East*?"

C. Anthony Pessarra

Reading "The Piano Book" By, Larry Fine

You may order a copy(s) from **KeyArts Piano of Houston**.

- The Piano Book: \$31.95 (Includes Shipping)
- The Piano Book, Annual Supplement/Prices: \$24.00 (Includes Shipping)
- Combination including both books: \$49.00 (Includes Shipping)

Check, Credit card, PayPal  
**KeyArts Piano of Houston**  
**14703 Sugar Plum Ln**  
**Houston, TX 77062**

chasa@houston.rr.com; 281-488-2055;  
Purchase on Website:  
[www.keyartshouston.com](http://www.keyartshouston.com)