

What's the Difference?

For middle school ages and older



Learning objectives:

- Compare the differences between an acoustic and a digital piano.
- Experiment with the different features of an acoustic piano to see what effect they have on the way a piece of music sounds.

Materials needed: Acoustic vs. Digital Piano Fact Sheet, acoustic piano, and digital piano

A. Read the Acoustic vs. Digital Piano Fact Sheet. Compare the features of the two types of instruments on the chart.

B. Complete these discussion questions.

1. What are the two types of acoustic pianos? What direction do the strings on a grand piano run?
2. What are some of the parts you find on an acoustic piano that are not on a digital piano?
3. What are some of the things you can do on an acoustic piano to change the expression of a song?
4. What is the purpose of touch sensitivity (or weighted action)?
5. Why might an acoustic piano cost more than a digital piano?
6. What is the best type of piano to practice on if you are taking lessons?

C. Try some of these activities.

Sit down at an acoustic piano keyboard and try these exercises to learn how you can change the expression in music you play. If you don't have an acoustic piano, listen to recorded piano music and note changes in expression.



Expression includes the dynamics, tempo, mood and articulation of a piece of music. The expression marks are the symbols or explanations used to tell the pianist how to interpret the song.

Experiment with dynamics. Play a single note or short melody as softly (*piano*) as you can and as loudly as you can (*forte*). What did you do to change the dynamics (loudness)? Next, start playing softly, then gradually get louder (*crescendo*.) Continue playing loudly and gradually get softer (*decrescendo*) until you can hardly hear the notes. Does it matter what part of the keyboard you are using? Is it harder to play softly or to play loudly?

Try some articulation. Press down on one key. Play it as a staccato note (short, separated, lift your hand immediately after playing.) Play it as an accented note (emphasize, stress the note.) Play it as a fermata (hold it down until you can't hear it anymore.) What did you do to make the notes sound different?

See what tempo has to do with expression. Choose several notes close together or a scale. Play the notes you've selected with these different tempos: moderate (*moderato*), fast (*allegro*), quick (*presto*), walking pace (*andante*), slow (*adagio*), very slow (*lento*) and then back to your original speed (*al tempo*). Could you tell the difference when you changed tempo?

Explore what pedals can do. Press down on the left (soft, una corda) pedal and keep it down while you play some notes. Take your foot off the pedal and play the notes again. How was the sound different? Pressing on the left pedal is one way to make the piano sound softer. Now press down on the right (sustaining) pedal. What happens when you play some notes? Keep your foot on the right pedal. Does the sound stop when you lift your hands off the keys? Some pianos have a middle pedal that does other things, but all pianos will have a right and left pedal.

Put what you've learned into action. Play a short song or melody without any expression at all (no change in volume or speed without changing how you hit each note). Sounds pretty dull, doesn't it? Now, take the same song and add whatever expression you like. Play it fast or slow, loud or soft, staccato or with lots of pedal action. Which do you prefer?

What did you learn about how you can add expression when you play on an acoustic piano? Try the same exercises listed above on a digital piano and compare to see what is different and what is the same.

