



Hands-free performance

The notion of a self-playing piano should no longer send chills down the discerning music fan's spine, for the instruments of the 21st century are highly effective, argues *Tom Lagomarsino*

IN LIVING ROOMS AROUND THE WORLD, MASTERFUL works by history's greatest composers are being kept alive through computer-equipped self-playing pianos. These instruments are capable of high-quality playback featuring over 1,000 levels of dynamic expression, and are therefore able to produce a broad range of music.

Self-playing pianos have come a long way since the day of the pneumatic reproducing instruments invented over a century ago. These relied upon air hoses, valves and punched paper rolls, and playback had little – if any – volume control. Performances were given by musicians on Tin Pan Alley – and performers included George Gershwin, who got his start there, playing for \$15 a week.



What distinguishes today's self-playing or 'intelligent' pianos from those of even a decade ago is their compatibility with wider technology, such as built-in microprocessors and high-speed internet, as well as with a plethora of wireless devices capable of streaming audio files joined with MIDI.

The piano performance itself is enhanced by the application of micro-technology capable of processing a huge range of dynamic expression for each note. The playback now captures the actual nuances and touch of the artists' recording, bringing personality and feeling to the music. Sophisticated calibration programmes adapt to the weight and geometry of any number of piano action make, design and size, and they maintain consistent pedalling.

Thanks to a seemingly limitless network of entrepreneurial developers and their flurry of compatible applications available on i-devices and androids, new features appear on a very regular basis, from karaoke to recording and sequencing, and from apps for live internet streaming to ones for long-distance teaching and learning.

VIRTUALLY ANY PIANO CAN BE FITTED WITH A self-playing and recording system, and because the new software allows a two-way piano link, music education can be more affordable and engaging than previously thought possible. While many other subjects, such as maths or English, lend themselves to distance-learning environments, music education – where the nuance of performance and sound is so important – has not previously had the benefit of realistically priced components to achieve this type of educational experience at the standards necessary for upper-level instruction and interaction.

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For those who don't play the piano but are lucky enough to own one, the self-playing technology means that the instrument need no longer sit idle and lifeless. A recording device can also be fitted, so that friends' performances can be relived, months or years later. Additionally, streaming media for live piano performances supplemented with audio and video content allows integration with iPads, computer tablets, mp3 players, smart phones, SD card and Thumbstick readers and sophisticated home audio or professional equipment.

Where to start? PianoDisc's iQ Systems are available through most local piano shops where there are technicians trained to equip instruments with a self-playing system. Many shops can also order any number of new grand or upright pianos with self-playing devices directly from piano manufacturers across Europe and Asia, who offer factory installation supervised by PianoDisc instructors and quality control professionals.

Today's self-playing technology is upgradable in both software and hardware, and companies like PianoDisc offer a popular music conversion service called the music legacy programme. This upgrade programme ensures that the piano music purchased 20 years ago will be converted to contemporary formats like mp3. 🎵

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For further information, visit www.pianodisc.com