

Pianos: The Loud and the Soft

Suppose a friend said, “I want to play the soft-loud!” You might be puzzled. What your friend means is that she wants to play the piano.

The piano was created

in Italy in 1700. Before this time, many people played harpsichords. Harpsichords, too, have a keyboard and strings inside a wooden case. However, on a harpsichord, the player cannot control how loud the tones are. In contrast, the notes on a piano can be played softly or loudly. The Italian words for *softly* and *loudly* are *piano* and *forte*. That’s why the instrument was named the *piano-forte*, or *soft-loud*.

By the 1800s, pianos became less expensive, so many families could buy one. Pianos were also built in different shapes, which could fit into many homes. In Germany and Australia, pianos were even built into sewing tables so women could both play the piano and sew.

How does a piano make its sound? The white and black keys on the keyboard are connected to strings

inside the instrument. One to three strings are connected to each key. Low notes have one string and high notes have three. When a key is pressed, a felt-covered hammer hits the strings, which vibrate to produce a note. Each of the piano’s 88 keys plays a different note. As in other instruments with strings, the piano’s wooden body amplifies the sound.

You might think that the piano is in the string family because its notes are made with strings. However, the piano is a percussion instrument. The percussion family includes drums, cymbals, and other instruments that make sounds when someone hits them.

Today, there are acoustic pianos and electric pianos. Acoustic pianos do not use amplifiers. In contrast, electric pianos need amplifiers to make sounds. Electric pianos are often used whenever people move their pianos around. You may have seen an electric piano in your favorite rock band. Today, the “soft-hard instrument” is everywhere!



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