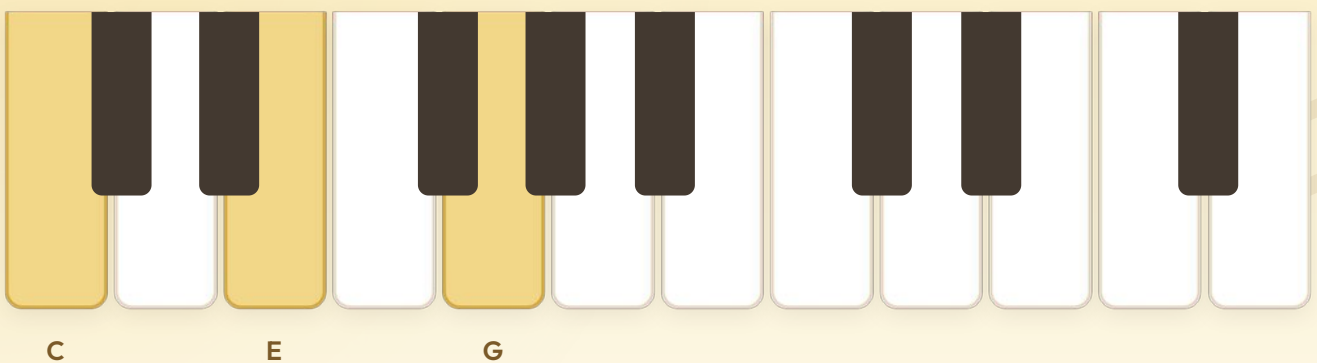


Root Position

Laying the groundwork for a lifetime of
sounding great with the piano



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Before we start

This book assumes exactly one thing about you: you can find a piano, and you are willing to touch it. That is the whole entry requirement. You do not need to read music. You do not need "talent." You do not need to have started at six.

What you do need is about twenty minutes, most days, for a while. That is the actual secret, and it is annoyingly unglamorous, so we have hidden it here on the first page where nobody looks.

How this book is built

Every chapter follows the same shape, because your brain likes patterns and hates surprises at 7 a.m.:

- **The idea.** Plain language, one analogy, no Latin unless the Latin is the point.
- **The picture.** A diagram or a line of music that makes the idea obvious.
- **The hands.** Something to actually play, immediately, before you forget.
- **The check.** A short exercise so you know whether it landed.

The four skills

People say "learning piano" as if it is one skill. It is four, and they progress at wildly different speeds. Knowing which one is lagging is most of what a good teacher does.

Skill	What it actually is	How it feels when it is behind
Technique	Getting your fingers to do what you asked	You know the notes but it sounds lumpy
Reading	Turning dots on a page into sound	You can play it once memorised, but new pages terrify you
Theory	Knowing why the notes are those notes	You memorise everything because nothing has a pattern
Ear	Hearing it and knowing what it was	You cannot tell if you played a wrong note

This book trains all four in parallel, in small doses, rather than finishing one before starting the next. That is deliberate. Doing a bit of each is slower to feel impressive and much faster to actually work.

A short warning about the internet

You will find people online who insist there is one correct fingering, one correct bench height, one correct order to learn things. Treat all of it as a strong default, not a law. Hands differ. Pianos differ. If a respected method says X and your hand is in pain doing X, your hand wins.

The one place we will be genuinely strict is pain. Piano should never hurt. Chapter 3 covers this properly, and Chapter 35 covers it again, because it is that important.

How to use this book

The thirty-nine chapters introduce the main ideas. Each chapter has a workshop that explores one idea more closely and an application page that puts it into practice. Read the chapter, use the workshop when you need another angle, then take the application to the keyboard.

Some early workshops include staff notation before the reading chapters have introduced it. At that stage, use the written keyboard instructions and the familiar five-note material. Return to the printed application after Chapters 12–14. The page is there for a second pass, not as a secret entrance exam.

Three useful routes

- Starting from nothing: follow the chapters in order, using their practical tasks and returning to notation applications once the staff is familiar.
- Returning after a break: use the workshops as checks, then choose key labs and studies that expose a specific gap.
- Already playing pieces: keep a fresh-reading routine, study the relevant harmony and use a targeted rhythm lesson when a passage stalls.

What the numbers mean

Chapter numbers identify the main route through the book. Numbers above or below notes indicate fingerings or musical counts; small numbers at the beginning of systems identify bars. Use the headings to distinguish an explanation, a workshop and a practical application.

Use the written return journey

Scale exercises are written ascending and descending. Learn the turnaround as well as the climb. The minor-key pages show the conventional difference between melodic-minor ascent and descent. Where fingerings are not printed, choose a comfortable, consistent route with the reference chart or your teacher before increasing speed.

The courses are material to work with over time. You are not expected to complete three hundred pages before being allowed to enjoy a tune. Play something you like while these skills grow beside it.

PART ONE

Boot Up

THE INSTRUMENT, YOUR BODY, AND THE FIVE MINUTES BEFORE YOU PLAY A NOTE

Nobody wants to spend time on setup. Setup is the part where you have not made music yet. But an hour spent on bench height and hand shape now will save you roughly a year of confused frustration later, so grit your teeth for three chapters.

1. Why the piano is easy to start and hard to stop

The piano has one enormous advantage over almost every other instrument: the note is already in tune, and it is already the right note, before you do anything skilful. Press the key, get the pitch. A violinist spends their first six months learning where the notes even are. You get them handed to you, laid out left to right, low to high, like a ruler.

That is also the trap. Because the first note is free, the piano lets you skip straight to trying to play things, which means most self-taught players end up with a small pile of half-learned pieces and no foundation underneath. The foundation is what this book is for.

What you can realistically expect

If you practise about	After 3 months you can typically	After 12 months
15 min, 5 days a week	Read simple two-hand music slowly; play a few short pieces	Play early-intermediate repertoire; read new easy music at sight
30 min, 5 days a week	Play hands together comfortably; know your major scales	Handle real repertoire and simple accompaniment from chord symbols
60 min, 6 days a week	Move quickly through a beginner method; solid reading	Approach standard intermediate repertoire

These are rough shapes, not promises. Progress in music is famously lumpy: three weeks of nothing, then a Tuesday where something clicks. Consistency beats duration. Twenty minutes daily will outrun three hours every Sunday, and it is not close.

REALITY CHECK

You are going to sound bad for a while. Everybody does. The difference between people who play piano and people who "used to try piano" is almost entirely tolerance for sounding bad in week three.

CHAPTER 1 WORKSHOP

Decide what progress sounds like

A beginner needs a definition of progress small enough to hear on an ordinary Tuesday. "Get good at piano" is not one. "Play these four bars without losing the pulse" is. The second target tells you what to practise, when to stop and what changed. The first mostly tells you that somebody on the internet is better than you.

Separate learning a skill from preparing a performance. During learning, you may stop, take the hands apart, change the fingering and spend five minutes on three notes. During a performance, you keep the music moving. Both are useful. Trouble begins when you judge a learning session by performance standards or spend a performance debugging the third bar.

Your first month should contain small finished things. A five-note tune played evenly is a finished thing. A scale played with comfortable crossings is another. These give you evidence that the process works, which matters more than an ambitious piece that remains permanently almost playable. Keep a small list of these wins. Memory is surprisingly good at deleting them.

A worked example

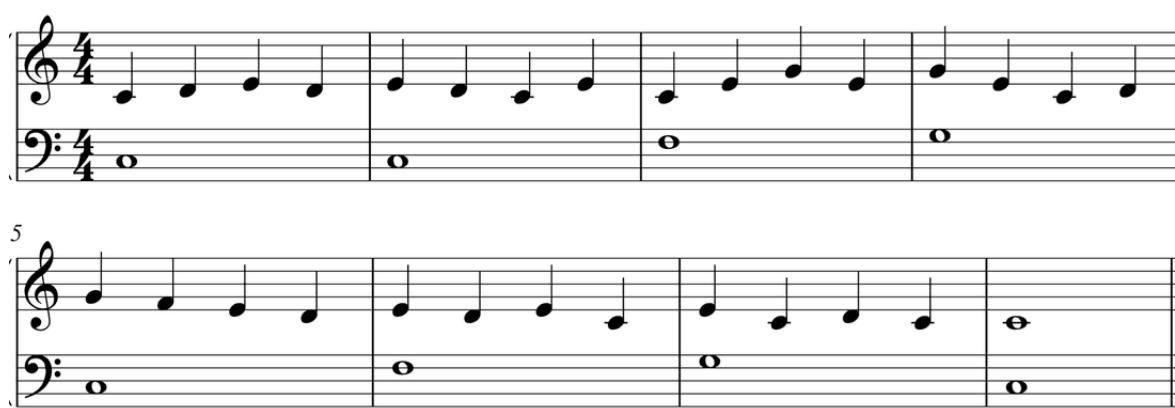
A useful weekly target has a passage, a condition and a test: "Play the first four bars, hands together, at a comfortable walking pulse, twice without stopping." If the pulse collapses, the next session begins with rhythm. If the pitches fail, begin with the hand that is getting lost. The result chooses the next task.

Take this to the piano

Use the application page as a baseline, not an examination. Note where you stop or look down. Return to it after two weeks. Compare the same task under similar conditions; comparing different tasks is a very efficient way to confuse yourself.

Put it into practice

- Choose one musical result you could finish this week. Write it as something another person could hear.
- Choose a separate reading goal using music easier than your main piece.
- Give each goal a stopping condition. “Until tired” does not count.
- At the end of the week, name one change in sound and one change in effort.



Check the result

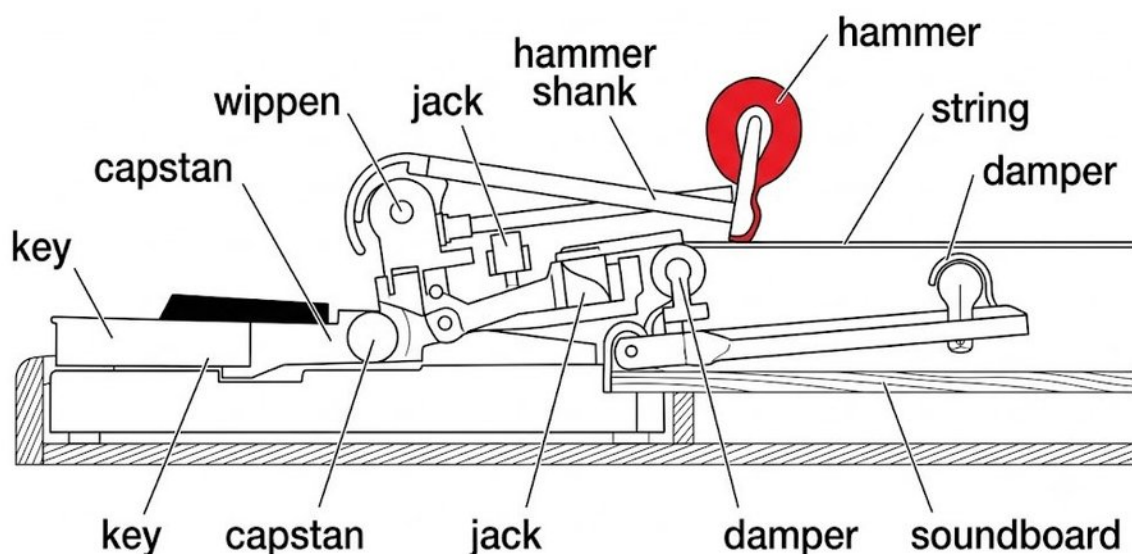
A goal such as “practise thirty minutes” measures attendance. It does not measure learning. Keep the attendance habit, but pair it with a musical test. An easier passage played with a steadier beat is genuine progress even if your hardest piece has not moved.

2. Meet your machine

An acoustic piano is a percussion instrument pretending to be a string instrument. You press a key, which is a lever, which throws a felt-covered hammer at a set of steel strings, which vibrate, which shake a big spruce soundboard, which shakes the air, which shakes your eardrum. Release the key and a felt damper drops back onto the string and shuts it up.

That whole chain is why the piano responds to how you press. Press faster, the hammer flies faster, the string moves more, the sound is louder and brighter. There is no volume knob. Your fingers are the volume knob. Digital pianos simulate this with velocity sensors, which is why a good one has weighted keys and a cheap one feels like typing.

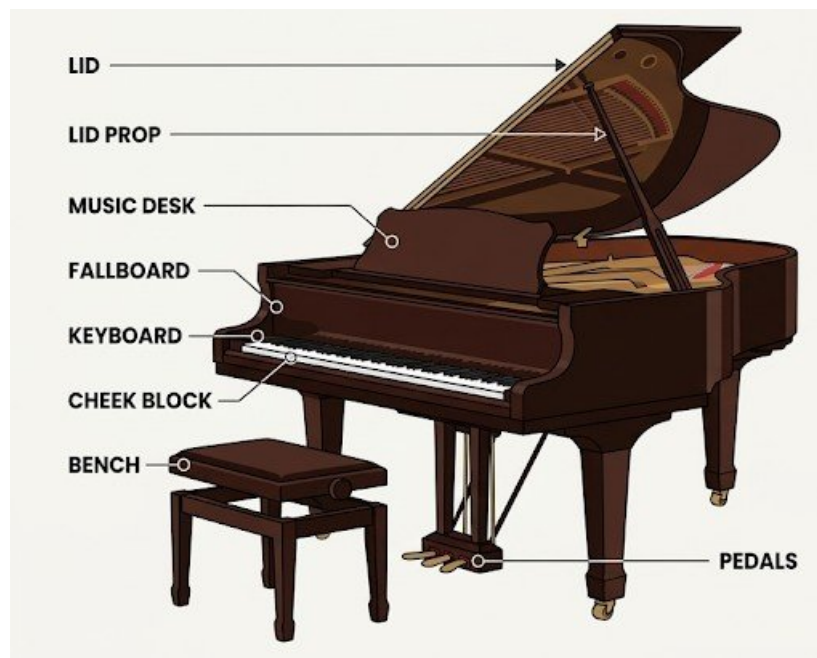
Cutaway of the piano action



The parts you will actually refer to

- **Keyboard.** 88 keys on a full piano: 52 white, 36 black, running from the note A0 at the bottom to C8 at the top. Low on the left, high on the right, always.
- **Fallboard.** The lid that covers the keys. Close it when you are done; dust is the enemy.
- **Music desk (or rack).** Where the sheet music sits. On a grand it folds out of the lid.
- **Lid and lid prop.** On a grand, the big hinged top and the stick that holds it up. Open lid equals louder and brighter.
- **Bench.** Not furniture. Equipment. See Chapter 3.

- **Pedals.** Two or three levers at your feet, covered below.



Which piano should you buy?

Short version: a digital piano with 88 fully weighted, hammer-action keys and a sustain pedal. Under that bar, you are learning on an instrument that will teach your hands the wrong habits.

Option	Good for	Watch out for
Digital piano, 88 weighted keys	Almost everyone starting out. Silent practice with headphones, never needs tuning, portable-ish.	Cheap "weighted" often means springs, not hammers. Try before buying if you can.
Keyboard / synth, 61 unweighted keys	Budget starts, producing, travel	Too few keys for most repertoire; no touch resistance, so dynamics never develop
Upright acoustic	Feel and tone at a reasonable footprint	Needs tuning roughly twice a year; second-hand ones can hide expensive faults
Grand acoustic	The real thing; the action repeats faster	Price, space, humidity, and your neighbours

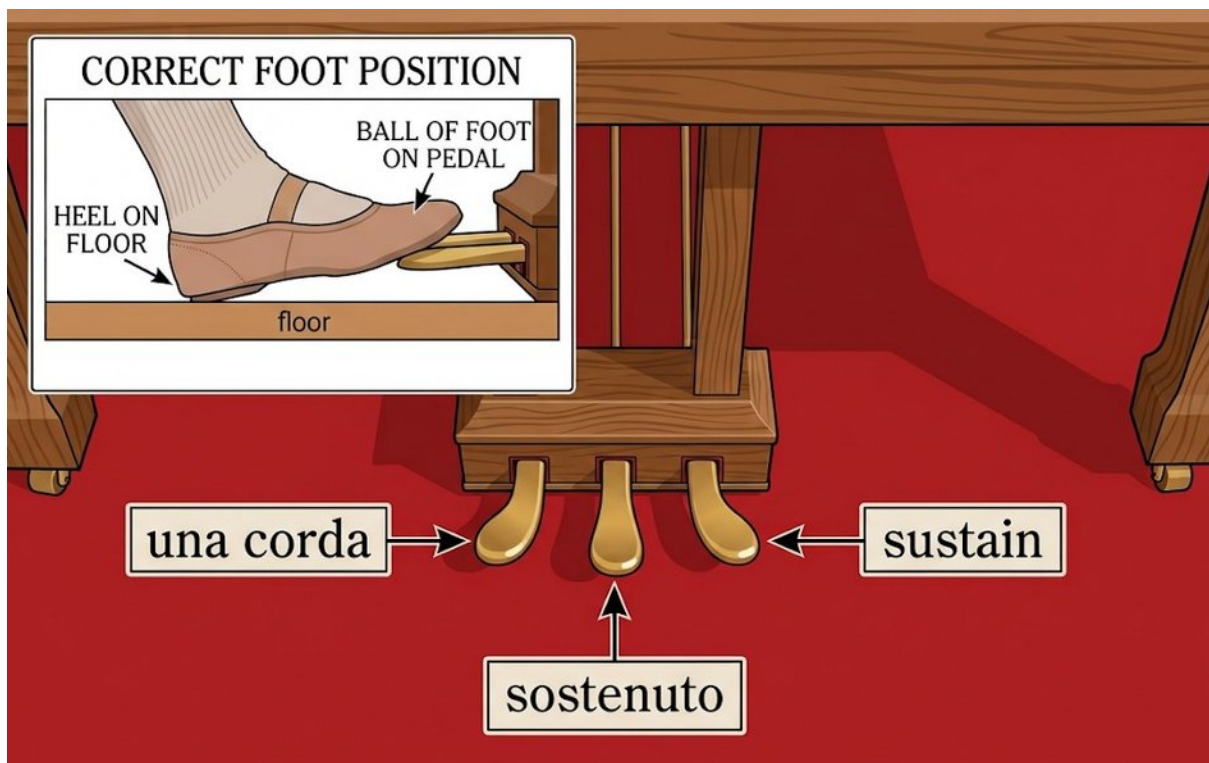
BUYING SHORTCUT

If you remember one spec: 88 keys, hammer action, touch sensitivity. Everything else — number of sounds, Bluetooth, built-in songs — is decoration. You will use three of the two hundred sounds and none of the built-in songs.

The pedals

Three pedals is standard on a grand and common on modern uprights and digitals. From the right:

- **Sustain (damper) pedal — right foot, right pedal.** Lifts every damper off every string at once. Notes keep ringing after you release the keys, and the undamped strings also vibrate in sympathy, which is why the whole instrument gets richer, not just longer. This is the pedal you will use 95% of the time.
- **Sostenuto — middle pedal.** Sustains only the notes you are already holding when you press it, and leaves everything played afterwards unaffected. Genuinely useful in later repertoire; ignorable for now. Note: on many uprights the middle pedal is not a sostenuto at all, but a practice or mute pedal that drops a felt strip in front of the hammers to make you quieter.
- **Una corda (soft) pedal — left pedal.** On a grand, it shifts the whole action sideways so the hammers strike fewer strings and with a less-used part of the felt. The result is quieter and, more importantly, different in colour — softer, veiled. On an upright it usually just moves the hammers closer to the strings, which is quieter but does not change the colour much.



THE MOST COMMON PEDAL MISTAKE

Beginners press the sustain pedal down and leave it there for the entire piece, turning everything into soup. The pedal is not a "make it sound nicer" switch; it is punctuation, and it changes with the harmony. Chapter 16 covers how it is notated. Until then: play without pedal.

Learn what your instrument actually does

The most useful controls on a digital piano are often the least glamorous: piano sound, volume, metronome and touch response. Spend one session finding them. Save a plain setup if the instrument allows it. Learning a new piece should not require remembering which menu contains the piano.

Volume and touch response are different controls. The volume knob changes the overall output. Touch response changes how the instrument maps key speed to loudness. If very small finger movements produce huge jumps in level, try a less sensitive setting. If everything sounds flat unless you work much too hard, try another response curve. Names differ between instruments, so use your ears rather than assuming that “heavy” is a training programme.

Test repeated notes, quiet notes and held notes in several registers. The bass will not sound like the middle and the top will not sustain like the bass. That is useful information, not a fault to fight with extra force. Learn the instrument you actually have. You can make music on a modest piano while understanding its limits.

A worked example

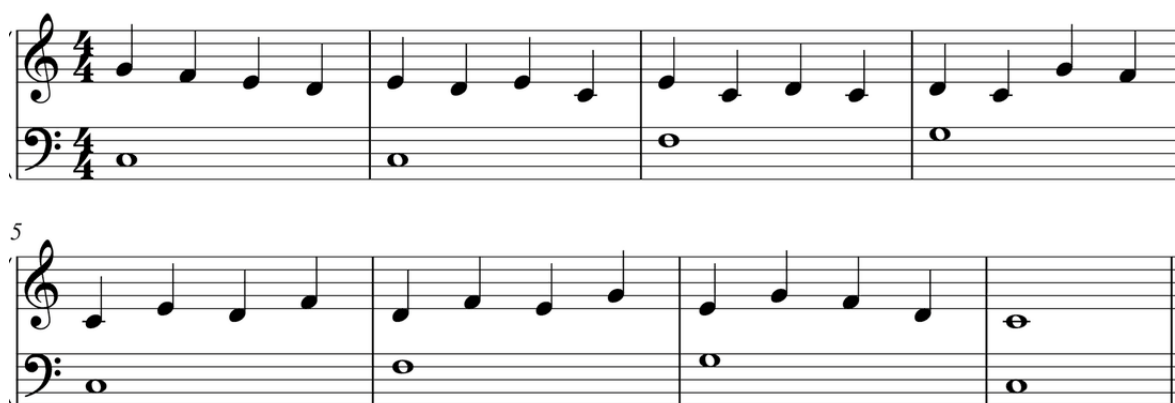
Play the same middle-register note five times: very softly, softly, moderately, a little louder, then softly again. Keep the volume knob fixed. Now hold one note and move only the knob. The first experiment changes the attack; the second changes the listening level. They solve different problems.

Take this to the piano

Use the next page to compare register and touch. The pitches repeat on purpose so you can listen to attack and decay. This is a sound experiment; speed contributes nothing to it.

Put it into practice

- Find the plain piano sound, metronome and headphone volume without consulting a menu twice.
- Compare a quiet five-note phrase through speakers and headphones at comfortable levels.
- Hold a note, release the key, then repeat with sustain. Describe what changes.
- Write down one instrument setting that helps and one effect that hides uneven playing.



Check the result

If reverb makes a detached phrase sound joined, it is adding a tail to the sound. It has not repaired the finger connection. Check technical work with modest effects, then choose an expressive sound for playing. On an acoustic instrument, use the same listening tests without looking for digital controls.