

From Novelty to Novelty: An Examination of the Social



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We find ourselves in an interesting time in the piano industry and the music industry overall. With the rise of digital technology, music in all forms is readily available to anyone at any time for little to no cost. We will return to this concept in a moment, but first let's go back a few hundred years.

When the piano was invented around the year 1700, not only was it a mostly unknown technological advancement, but it was rudimentary and often ridiculed. Musicians of the time preferred the older, better established and refined instruments like the harpsichord and did not take the risk of owning a piano (or pianoforte, as it was originally termed) seeing it as a **novelty**. Over the next 90 or so years, craftsmen and musicians alike tinkered with the piano mechanism and design and brought it to a level competitive with other more commonly used instruments. At this point, it became something capable of producing a new variety of music that was sought after, and more craftsmen began to devote themselves to making fine acoustic pianos.

In my estimation, from about 1790 to about 1850 the piano came to be thought of as a quality **luxury** item owned by the wealthy. It was a symbol of status and added significant value to the décor of a room. They were kept and used by the nobility who would host salons and other gatherings where musicians of the highest sophistication would be invited to perform to showcase their skills and compositions. The average person probably never saw a piano in person let alone got close enough to play one. Piano playing was for the aristocracy or those who worked for them.



This all changed when industrial activities increased and mass production was born around the 1850s. Piano craftsmen would design a piano and then teams of workmen with machines would produce great numbers of the instruments. Pianos became cheaper and more accessible and were not only easier for the average person to obtain, but were one of the only ways music could be brought into the home setting. Of course, other instruments had always been available, but none compared to the range and complexity of the piano. At this time, pianos had become a **necessity** for every home and myriads of amateur musicians could be found in every city and most towns. Mass printings of sheet music occurred and the works were distributed all across the Western world. By the early 1900s, there were thousands of piano manufacturers in the United States and Europe.

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But this all came to a screeching halt with the panic of 1907 and the start of WWI only a decade later. By WWII, the radio had been invented and refined and music and shows were being broadcast across continents. Many radio programs started as live performances, but by the 1950s and 1960s recordings began to take over. This put the piano industry in a difficult position. The piano was no longer the best way to bring music into the average home due to being overshadowed by the radio. Then the television came into production and pianos again became more of a **luxury** item for the wealthy than something found in every family common room.

Today we find ourselves in a time where the internet provides any type of entertainment to anyone anywhere 24/7. Music schools are reducing acceptance or closing because fewer students are showing up. Acoustic piano manufacturers are producing fewer instruments because there isn't as high a demand, biannual tunings are certainly a thing of antiquity for current owners, and more people are buying inexpensive digital keyboards instead. Music stores are closing their doors because there isn't a demand for instruments when anyone can tell an AI bot to produce a symphony in a few minutes. Pianos, and the playing of them, seem to be returning to a **novelty**; it is actually quite difficult to even give away a piano in today's market and there are an abundance of "free" pianos available online, reducing market value significantly, and removing them from the luxury item category. A lot of people see the latest electronic technology as a higher status symbol than pianos. Which begs the question: will pianos even be produced in 30 years? 20 years? At this point, it's hard to tell where all this is going.