



Unofficial Yamaha Piano Buyer's Guide (version 8)

By Mark Goodwin

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I'd like to start off with a quote by Larry Fine who is the author of "The Piano book"

"Pianos that have been reconditioned or rebuilt by a competent piano technician and are in excellent condition are actually better than new ones [...]."

And...

"Faced with a shrinking piano market and increasing competition, some salespeople resort to tactics that are quite irritating, if not downright unethical. There are also some great piano stores around; the difference between the two can be breathtaking."

I've shown you those quotes to highlight how important it is to arm yourself with accurate and relevant information to enable yourself to spot the best pianos and walk away from everything else.

CALL US WITH ANY QUESTIONS

020 7060 5889

### **Quick reference section:**

Here is a brief summary of each question. I will expand on each of these questions later.

#### **Is a new Yamaha better than a used Yamaha?**

New pianos can be bright and loud. Reconditioned may suit you better.

#### **Is it true that some new pianos have plywood soundboards?**

Yes. Always insist on a solid spruce soundboard.

#### **Is it important where a piano was made?**

Japanese pianos are high quality. Avoid pianos made with cheap labour

#### **Are Yamaha pianos too bright?**

If you choose the right model, the sound is smooth and rich. Choose the wrong model and yes, they can sound thin and bright.

#### **Is a new B1/2/3 better than a reconditioned U1 or U3?**

The B series are entry level. The U series are professional grade. Aim high!

#### **What about the Yamaha P series?**

They used to be made in England but are now made in Indonesia.

#### **Are taller pianos better than smaller ones?**

Tall pianos have long strings are large soundboards. Aim for pianos that are 130cm tall. Avoid anything below 120cm.

#### **What are the current brand new prices of Yamaha pianos?**

They range from £3000 for the B1 up to £9400 for the U3S

#### **What are the differences between the U1 and U3?**

The U3 is 10cm taller, has longer strings, a larger soundboard and a richer sound.

#### **What are the U30A, UX30, U30BL, YUX models all about?**

They are upgraded and experimental models aimed at the Japanese market.

#### **What makes an expensive piano higher quality?**

"Better raw materials, more exacting tolerances and stricter standards"

**Do imported Yamaha pianos suffer from humidity issues?**

We've imported hundreds of pianos from Japan and we think it's a non-issue.

**What age of Yamaha piano should I go for?**

I recommend 1975-1995

**Can a reconditioned Yamaha piano have a silent kit fitted?**

Yes, it's a straight-forward process and the results are very impressive.

**Do Yamaha pianos hold their value well?**

Yes because lots of people are clambering to buy them and prices are rising

**How can I trust a dealer to look after me?**

Email every question that pops into your head. See if the dealer remains patient and helpful.

**Some pianos have a German name but Chinese manufacture**

Halt! Dies ist nicht die reale sache!

**Green issues**

Buying a reconditioned piano doesn't cost the earth.

**Will a piano fit inside my front door or up our staircase?**

99% of the time, yes. It is very rare that a piano delivery fails.

**Should I take my piano teacher with me when viewing pianos?**

It would be better to bring a piano tuner but a piano teacher can be helpful too

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I hope you don't mind if I slip in a very quick sales pitch so that you know what we stock and how we do things. Here goes:

- We usually have 50+ reconditioned Yamaha pianos in stock which you can see at [www.markgoodwinpianos.co.uk/stock](http://www.markgoodwinpianos.co.uk/stock)
- We offer a 30 day trial in your home of any of our upright Yamaha pianos
- Pay nothing until the piano is safely inside your home. No deposit up front.
- View our previous happy customers at

[www.markgoodwinpianos.co.uk/testimonials](http://www.markgoodwinpianos.co.uk/testimonials)

- Please call us on 020 7060 5889 or email [mgpianos@gmail.com](mailto:mgpianos@gmail.com) with any questions
- 

Now then, on with the show. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.

**Is a new Yamaha better than a used Yamaha?**

In my experience the newer pianos I've played were often brighter and louder sounding, they often benefit from a "soft fall" lid that won't trap your fingers and the action seems slightly heavier.

When you are in a piano shop it can be easy to think that the louder piano is the best one but when you get the piano home to a smaller room and you are playing for longer periods of time, that extra volume can be a nuisance.

This issue is also raised in Larry Fine's book several times:

"Many pianos today can be played only loud and louder."

And...

"The biggest comment from all my Yamaha clients is 'can you make the thing quieter'"

And...

"[New] Yamaha verticals tend to be bright sounding, sometimes even brash, and they get even brighter with use."

So be careful about that one! Don't automatically assume that newer is better, make sure you give the reconditioned pianos a fair try.

When people visit our shop we usually advise them to play their favourite short passage of music as quietly as possible and then as loudly as possible to make sure they feel in control of the keys at all volumes. It can be very difficult to play some new pianos as softly as you would like.

I have found that properly reconditioned U1 and U3 pianos from the 1975 – 1995 period have a rounded tone, they are not too shrill and the action is not too heavy which makes them perfect for tackling fast passages of music and ideal for young fingers too.

The popular soft-fall system can be fitted to any used piano.

### **Don't buy a piano with a plywood soundboard.**

Here is a quote taken from the uk-piano.org forum where piano technicians meet to chat about the piano industry:

“The defining factor about the B series is they have plywood soundboards. The salesman will tell you it is 'laminated to withstand changes in temperature and humidity' but the fact is it's plywood and I think most people can hear the difference when it's next to a 'normal' piano with a solid soundboard. Yes, it brings the price down (manufacturing a solid soundboard is tricky and expensive), but surely people want a piano with a pleasant tone.

Here are Larry Fine's thoughts on the use of spruce for piano soundboards:

“Soundboards are traditionally made of a solid sheet of quarter-sawn spruce, Spruce is used because it has a fine, straight grain, is strong and resilient, and reproduces the sound of the strings better than any other material. It is also used in violins and other fine stringed instruments.”

The Yamaha U series have solid spruce soundboards, the Yamaha B1 has laminated plywood soundboards. Top quality spruce is getting more scarce and expensive all the time so it is no surprise that more and more of the cheaply made pianos being produced by many manufacturers are now made with plywood soundboards.

### **Is it important where a piano was made?**

Things used to be simple. Steinways were made in Germany, Kemble were made in England and Yamaha were made in Japan. But now we have Steinway pianos being made in Japan and China (their Boston and Essex lines), Kemble have moved all production to Indonesia and Yamaha have factories in several countries including Japan, China and Indonesia. The name on the front of the piano no longer indicates the manufacture location.

Yamaha's top of the range pianos such as the U series uprights and the C1, C3, C7 etc grand pianos (now renamed C1X, C2X, C3X) are still made in Japan

but the B and P series uprights are made in other countries including Indonesia. Yamaha's concert grand piano, the CFX, is made in Japan and has a price tag of around £120,000.

Let's see what Larry Fine thinks about Japanese pianos:

"In Japan, engineering is a highly respected profession and factory management is elevated to a high art. The Japanese factories are among the most automated anywhere, and Japanese pianos are among the most uniformly made. This precision, and the intelligence with which the pianos are designed, especially for servicing, are the chief assets of Japanese pianos.

By contrast, here is Larry's comment on the Chinese and Indonesian pianos that have flooded the UK market:

"Whilst many of these instruments are now acceptable, the quality is far from uniform or consistent, and the majority require extensive adjusting by the importer or dealer. Occasionally, large numbers of instruments have had to be returned for repair. Prospective customers should be reminded that these are, at best, entry-level pianos and that they have little or no track record. [...] Chinese and Indonesian pianos are not yet suitable for most purposes."

He continues...

"Chinese pianos are improving, but are still only barely satisfactory and have little in the way of track record, [a technician commented that] 'they tend to have a fairly cheap sound, lacking in fundamental' and 'they tune Okay, but it's not a satisfying musical experience.'"

### **Are Yamaha pianos too bright?**

Smaller, cheaper piano can sometimes be too bright and thin sounding but this is certainly not true of the larger models.

You should choose a mellow piano if you have a small, hard room and choose a bright piano if you need the sound to fill a particularly large room (choir rehearsal room for example) but for most people the

mid-toned Yamaha U3 or U1 is the most appropriate choice as it is mellow enough to play very softly but still carries enough punch to handle those *Fortissimo* passages.

A Yamaha U1 tends to be brighter than a Yamaha U3. The U3 has that extra depth and smoothness of tone whereas the U1 can sound like it has a bit more attitude to the tone which can often make it more suited to jazz or pop where instant, bright sounds are often more desirable.

Customers often ask us to choose a piano for them and we will always ask what type of room the piano is to go in and providing that the room isn't too hard or too soft then we will recommend a nice, mid-toned Yamaha U3 for them.

I've started to make a huge list of video recordings of our pianos and have created separate lists of Bright, Medium and Mellow sounding pianos. You can see the latest list of recordings at [www.yamahau3.co.uk](http://www.yamahau3.co.uk)

### **Is a brand new Yamaha B1 / B2 / B3 upright better than a used Yamaha U1 / U3?**

Larry makes the following general point:

“[Pianos that have been] reconditioned or rebuilt by a competent piano technician and are in excellent condition are actually better than new ones [...].

To put that into context here in the UK you might find that a properly reconditioned U1 or U3 from the mid-70s through to the mid-90s may be a better option for you than a brand new B series piano.

You should also consider the fact that brand new pianos can be quite volatile and still have a lot of settling down to do. For this reason, it can be hard to make them stay in tune and you may notice problems developing within the action

According to Larry;

“Most [new] pianos required at least four tunings in the home during the first year of ownership. An inexpensive piano that is not tuned enough in the factory, even if tuned by the dealer, may go disastrously out of tune in your home and need several remedial tunings (paid for by you) before it will even begin to hold its tune.”

Here is more from Larry on new Yamaha pianos:

"The factory preparation of Yamaha pianos [has] declined somewhat in recent years"

And...

"I would suggest having all the action screws tightened in Yamaha verticals after 6 months or so of use to avoid the clicking sounds caused by loose flanges and, sometimes, by a loose letoff rail."

And...

"A small number of Yamaha consoles and studios [small pianos] had keys that were so severely warped as to make levelling and regulation impossible."

This time regarding new Yamaha grands...

"Many technicians complained about the tone quality of some Yamaha grands. The 5ft 3in GH1 and GP1 were both heavily criticised for poor tone and for tuning difficulties due to poor scaling."

Thankfully, it is very nice to hear that the Yamaha U series pianos are still being made to high standards. Here are some technicians' comments about the Yamaha U1 as quoted in Larry's book:

"The 48" model U1 is still considered by many to be one of the best values amongst pianos. "...an absolutely gorgeous piano to tune, play and listen to," wrote one technician. "Flawless!" wrote another, "Easy tuning – still my pick of the litter!"

The advice is clear. Don't buy a budget piano! A reconditioned U1 or U3 is far better and costs a similar amount.

### **What about a new P series Yamaha upright? Are they a better option than a used Yamaha U1 or U3?**

The P series are smaller than the U series and used to be made in England in the Kemble factory but are currently being made in Indonesia. At the time of writing a new Yamaha P121 will cost £2500+ more than a reconditioned, Japanese-made Yamaha U1.



## Are taller pianos better than smaller pianos?

When a customer chooses a small piano they are putting practical considerations before musical quality. This mentality has a direct affect on build quality and sound quality. Larry explains it very well below:

“The size of a piano is probably the single most important factor influencing its tonal quality. The longer strings, particularly in the bass section of the larger sizes, results in greater resonance of tone and in a harmonic content that is most pleasing to the listener. The smaller the piano, the worse the tonal quality. An additional factor, though, makes the question of size even more important: because the tonal quality of small pianos tends to be poor, the people who buy these pianos are usually more interested in the styling and looks of the case than in the quality of the instrument inside the case. Therefore, manufacturers invest more of their money in the appearance of the instruments than in its quality. The result is that, quite apart from any effects of acoustical laws, smaller pianos are often more poorly built than larger ones.”

That is a very powerful paragraph don't you think? For the above reasons I would recommend that you buy a piano that is around 130cm tall, or if that really is too big for you then I recommend that you aim for at least 120cm tall.

Here are the dimensions of the most popular pianos from Yamaha's current range:

Model	Height	Width	Depth	Made
B1	109	148	54	Indonesia
B2	113	149	53	Indonesia
B3	121	152	61	Indonesia
P114	115	151	55	Indonesia
P116	116	152	58	Indonesia
P121	121	152	60	Indonesia
U1	121	151	61	Japan
U3	131	153	65	Japan

The Yamaha U3 is the only piano above 130cm in height and that is why it is so popular.

## **What are the current prices of new Yamaha pianos?**

### **Yamaha B1 £3000 – 109cm**

Made in Indonesia. Mark says: This is a very small piano. For the best sound choose pianos above 130cm tall. If £3000 is your maximum budget consider a reconditioned Yamaha U1

### **Yamaha B2E £4000 – 113cm**

Made in Indonesia. Another very small piano, consider something taller for a better sound. With this budget you could get a very nice reconditioned Yamaha U3.

### **Yamaha B3E £4700 – 121cm**

Made in Indonesia . The tallest of Yamaha's entry level pianos at 121cm but for this budget you can afford a very nice, young, reconditioned Japanese-made Yamaha U3 at 131cm.

### **Yamaha P116 £5500 – 116cm**

Made in Indonesia. Only 116cm tall, try something taller. With this budget consider a very young and very special Japanese made reconditioned Yamaha U3

### **Yamaha P121 £6200 – 121cm**

Made in Indonesia. Reasonable size but for a lot less than this amount you can get a very young 131cm Yamaha U3 or the upgraded versions, Yamaha U30BL or UX etc

### **Yamaha U1 £7900 – 121cm**

Made in Japan. Excellent piano but for £3000 less you can get a mint condition, little-used stunning Yamaha U3 or U30BL which are both 10cm taller with a richer sound

### **Yamaha YUS1 £9200 – 121cm**

Made in Japan. Same comment as above but this time you spend £4000 less than this price. Consider a Yamaha U3 or maybe a Yamaha U30BL or UX

### **Yamaha U3S £9400 – 131cm**

Made in Japan. Very nice piano of course. If you've got the budget, sure, go for it. Otherwise, get the same musical quality from a very young, little-used U3 for £3000-£4000 less.

### **Yamaha YUS3S £10,700 – 131cm**

Made in Japan. A super piano for the man/lady who must have the best and it must be brand new. If you're considering this you probably won't be swayed

by spending half that amount for a really young and amazing Yamaha U3 , will you? Or maybe you will?

**Yamaha YUS5 £11,600 – 131cm**

Made in Japan. Same comment as above. Do you really HAVE to spend this much? What if you spent just half this amount on a 5 year old piano that has just say unplayed in someone's house?

**Yamaha SU7 £19,800 – 131cm**

Made in Japan. Boom! The Yamaha SU7. If you are looking for one of these you won't need my advice and you won't be worried about the budget either. Good luck and enjoy this beast! Oh and call me for the best price!

**What makes an expensive piano higher quality?**

At the time of writing the RRP for the U3 is around £9500 and the B1 is around £3000. Why such a difference in price? Here is what our friend Larry has to say about the general question of piano prices in relation to quality

“Just what makes a well-made piano more expensive? Briefly, good pianos require better raw materials, which are prepared to more exacting tolerances and subjected to stricter standards of quality than materials in lesser pianos. Sometimes a great deal of expensive material (such as wood, felt, or leather) that does not conform to these standards is rejected or discarded. In both design and workmanship, much more time and attention is paid to details that might otherwise plague the owner or technician later.”

There are approximately 18 tons of pressure being exerted on the various structural elements of the piano and if this structure is not of the most robust quality then things start to move, creak, crack and go out of tune. So your focus must be placed on build quality before all other factors.

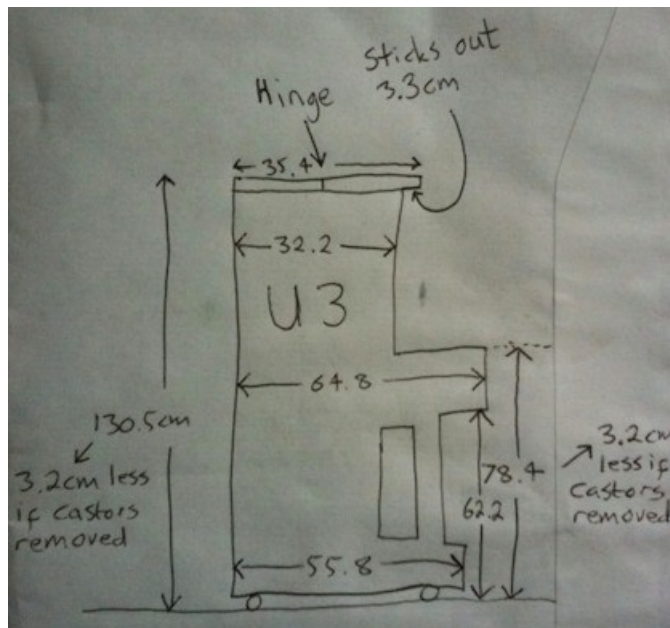
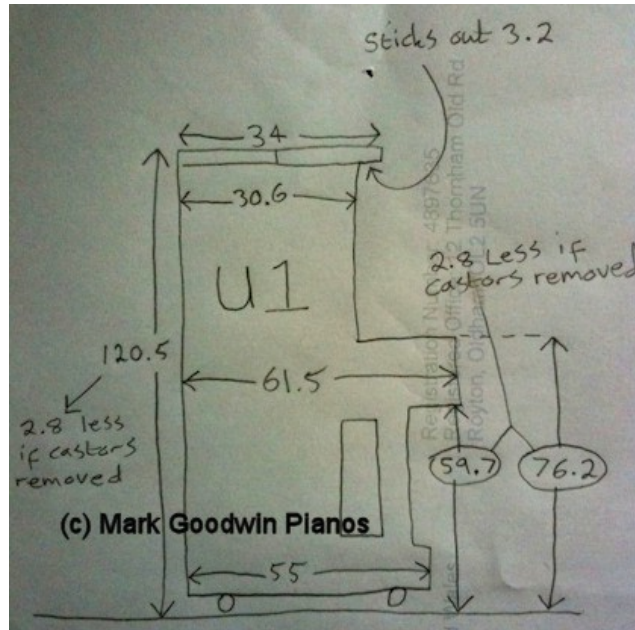
To quote Larry Fine,

“If you can't afford to buy a reasonably good-quality piano now and you can't arrange a loan or credit plan, then save up for the piano that you want rather than temporarily settling for a poor one. A poor quality piano will cost you more in the long run for maintenance and repairs and will rob you of your enthusiasm.”

## What is the difference between a Yamaha U1 and a Yamaha U3?

The only difference is that the U3 is 10cm taller which allows it to house longer strings and a larger soundboard. The longer strings give it a smoother, richer tone (especially in the bass where it is much warmer) and the larger soundboard gives the U3 a sound quality that is better than many grand pianos.

Here are the physical differences. Sorry the diagram is so scruffy!



## What are the U30A, UX30, U30BL, YUX models all about?

These are upgraded Yamaha U3 variants designed for the Japanese domestic market which has more

demanding professionals. They were more expensive when new and used upgraded materials and experimental design features. The letter "X" in any Yamaha upright model means that the piano has an X-Shaped frame around the back of the piano. Yamaha has since phased out this design, apparently because it was too expensive. I've written an exhaustive list of alternative upgraded models along with some research, analysis and sound recordings. You can visit that page here: <http://bit.do/U3variants>

### **Do imported Yamaha pianos suffer from humidity issues?**

The claims are that Yamaha have manufactured certain batches of pianos in a certain way depending on what part of the world they are going to. The main claim revolves around the different humidity levels of the various parts of the world.

However, when you start to look within each of the countries and continents you realise that humidity levels swing wildly from one region to the next. In the USA for example you've got Washington, Florida and Texas with humidity levels up to 83% but on the opposite end of the scale you've got places like Nevada and Arizona with humidity levels down towards 30%. You will also find significant differences in humidity and climate for many countries across Europe but you don't see piano manufacturers claiming that they manufacture different batches of pianos for each individual country in Europe.

We've stocked hundreds of imported Yamaha U1 and Yamaha U3 pianos and I'm very happy to report that there has been no evidence of any humidity-related problems appearing in these pianos. We have a long line of happy customers who are happy that they took the route of buying a reconditioned Yamaha piano.

### **What age of piano should I go for?**

Here is a list of serial numbers of Yamaha pianos that were made in the Japanese factory along with some comments about their quality.

#### **122,000 – 809,000 / Made in the 1960s**

Some shops stock these because they can buy them relatively cheaply but we prefer to stock younger models. However, if your budget only stretches this far then they are worth considering over a new Chinese piano.

#### **978,000 – 1,943,000 / Made between 1970 – 1975**

These pianos can be very good but you need to be

completely satisfied that a very thorough reconditioning has taken place. Ideally you should look towards the "golden era" of 1975 – 1995 (approx).

### **1,943,000 – 5,300,000 / Made in 1975 – 1995 "The Golden Era"**

Now we're talking! Yamaha pianos from this period are bought by piano shoppers who have done their research, steered clear of Chinese piano, resisted 1960s Yamahas and are drawn to the famous "Golden Era" of Yamaha piano manufacture. The bass section is warm and smooth, the middle section is full of warmth and energy and the treble section is crisp and brilliant but without being thin or tinny.

The "Golden Era" 20 year period is not set in stone and in practise it should also encompass pianos built between 1970-2000 and onwards.

### **5,300,000 – 6,000,000 / Made from 1995 – 2000 and beyond**

If you have a higher budget you might also consider the excellent pianos found in this period. Expect to pay a premium as they can be quite rare and often you will find upgraded "X" or "BL" models (U3X, U30BL etc) in this age range as Yamaha experimented with different materials on pianos that were aimed at Japanese professional pianists. For more on these upgraded models please visit <http://bit.do/U3Variants> for a full break down.

### **Can a used Yamaha U1 or U3 piano have a silent system fitted?**

Yes we can fit a PianoDisc silent system to any of our Yamaha pianos which converts the piano to a fully acoustic piano that also has a digital piano built into it. Flick a switch and the hammers are prevented from touching the strings and you listen instead through the headphones. It's a really good system and we have many happy customers who have chosen this optional upgrade.

For more details on this please visit <http://bit.do/silentpiano> or search online for "Mark Goodwin Pianos Silent Pianos".

### **Do Yamaha pianos hold their value well?**

Yes they hold their value very well. Any new piano will quickly plummet in value as most new items do but reconditioned pianos will hold their value longer especially if you buy a popular model because you can guarantee that lots of people will be looking for that same model when you are ready to sell it on in

the future.

For the past 4 or 5 years Japanese pianos have risen sharply in price due to exchange rate shifts and shortage of supply in Japan. The pattern is likely to continue which will make it easier to achieve a high selling price for your piano in future. If you don't want the hassle of finding a buyer we can sell it for you in our showroom on a commission basis. See here: <http://bit.do/sell4u>

### **How to choose a good piano dealer**

In my opinion, the best way to find a safe person to deal with is to ask them lots of question before getting anywhere close to placing an order or even visiting them. Email them and ask how and why they got into selling pianos in the first place and ask lots of questions about any of the pianos that you are considering purchasing. You will get a good feel for the characters in charge of the shop by doing this. It is also a good idea to ask all of your most cheeky questions and see what answers you get. If the dealer becomes impatient with you then perhaps that is a sign of things to come. Could you trust the after-sales care of someone who became impatient with you even before they had your money?

You might also find a better level of service by visiting a smaller, independent shop rather than a large shop who has signed numerous retail and distribution contracts with manufacturers. The small, independent piano dealer has not signed any deals with manufacturers or distributors so they can stock whatever they like based on quality, not price. They have no targets and no obligations so they have no reason to pressurise you towards a particular piano.

## **German branding but Chinese manufacture**

A new trend amongst cheap piano manufacturers is to claim that their piano was designed by a German engineer or that it was built "in collaboration" with German piano makers. Here's what Larry says about this:

"An increasing number of companies – especially Korean and Chinese – hire "German" scale designers or engineers with German-sounding names to redesign their pianos. Although they may make improvements, the instruments will still retain many, if not most, of the limitations of the original, unimproved version."

Always ask "Where was this piano made?"

## **Green Issues**

You are probably familiar with the phrase "throw-away society". Well, I've come to the realisation that the brand new cheap pianos are the latest items to be added to the list of disposable products. Here is Larry's take on the green issue:

"There are good reasons to buy a used piano. Since the average life of a piano is around 50 years, and with proper restoration at least fifty more, recycling older pianos makes ecological sense."

## **Will a piano fit inside my front door or up our staircase?**

We have always been pleasantly surprised that even a nice, big Yamaha U3 will fit around most corners, into most rooms and up most staircases. You can make a cardboard cut out of a U1 or U3 using the diagram found elsewhere in this buyer's guide and then slide it along the floor and turn it through your various doorways. If you can manage it without touching the walls then a piano will indeed fit.

I've made a page displaying a list of stairjob cases studies that our piano movers have either successfully completed or they have told us it isn't possible. You can see that page at:

<http://bit.do/stairjobs>

## **Should I take my piano teacher with me when viewing pianos?**

A piano teacher can be a helpful 2<sup>nd</sup> opinion and you can stand back and listen whilst they play. Just bear



in mind that piano teachers usually have very limited knowledge about piano reconditioning so you might consider bringing a piano technician instead. You are welcome to bring any piano teacher or piano tuner to our showrooms to help reassure you of the quality of our pianos.

### **Should I buy a used Yamaha Piano without viewing it first?**

Never ever buy a cheap piano without playing it first because the quality is such a gamble. Higher quality models such as the Yamaha U1 and U3 are more consistent so you might think that you are less likely to get stung. However, that is only half of the story. You need to make sure that the piano has not had a hard life and that the dealer has done a proper job of reconditioning the piano. Otherwise you may have to arrange for costly reconditioning work in your home.

I've made a step-by-step guide for customers who want to buy a piano without visiting our showroom. You can read the guide here: <http://bit.do/novisit>

### **Case study about buying a new piano**

Whilst writing this buyer's guide I've received the following email from a lady who recently bought a brand new Chinese grand piano:

"Do you have a C1 used grand? I just had a bad experience with a brand new grand that thankfully was returned and the money refunded. Now realised ya get what ya pay for. It kept dropping out of tune two weeks after it was tuned! They accepted it was faulty and offered to replace but after advice I declined. I have my heart set on a C1 either new or used but it really is tight re funds. I realise there is no point buying cheaper versions so want one now lol."

"Ya get what ya pay for". I couldn't have said it better myself!

Please email us at [mgpianos@gmail.com](mailto:mgpianos@gmail.com) or phone us on [020 7060 5889](tel:02070605889) with any questions

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Mark and Julie Goodwin