

Comfortable seating at the piano

Good piano playing is only possible if we are comfortably seated at the piano. Therefore, at the beginning of every lesson and practice session, we arrange our piano bench so that it's the best height for playing and the best distance from the piano.

The best **height** is one which both allows the elbow/upper arm to fall freely from the shoulder, and allows the forearm to be parallel to the floor when the forearm and hand are in their natural shape -- the way they are when the hand is hanging at the side.

The best **distance** is one which allows our elbows to rest slightly in front of our center line when our hands are in a neutral position on the keyboard, with our hands in front of the elbows (i.e., not in front of the body or at the extremes of the keyboard).

The upper arm feels quite easy and normal -- not heavy or held, not lifted up or reaching forward. The forearm and hand are at ease, but not so relaxed they are heavy. They are in the shape they are in when hanging at the side, filled with the life that makes movement possible. The wrist is in one piece with the hand and forearm, not holding up or falling down.

Where to sit on the bench

We sit on the front of the bench. Our torsos need to move from the hip joint, so the freedom of the hip joint is one thing to check to see if we're sitting in a good place. We sit far enough back on the bench to feel stable enough that we do not need to hold ourselves in place (it's not good to feel perched). We sit forward enough on the bench to allow the hip joint to move freely. If too much of our thighs are on the bench, our torso is forced back and it is difficult to move forward from the hip joint.

A few illustrations of comfortable seating at the piano

Here you can see four before-and-after illustrations of solutions students found so they can sit comfortably at the piano.



The bench is too low for Tom. His elbows are a little low - they would look lower, but as you can see, his wrists are compensating by pulling up to give some support to the hands. It is admirable of the body to try to create balance even though it is deprived of the best conditions, but it is not ideal. His arm and hand are out of alignment at the wrist, the top knuckles are flattened out because of the high wrist, and the fingers are also too extended.



Just two carpet samples, and, voilà! Tom's forearms are parallel to the floor, his wrists are an easy one piece with the forearm and hand, and his knuckles have returned.



The bench, is too high for Allison. It's at its top height because everyone else who uses this bench has to add things to it. When she sat down, she laughed because she felt so strange, and said, "I just don't feel like my arms can rest down." The longer she sat there, the more tempting it was for her torso to fall forward. Allison is very aware of her posture. If she weren't, she would have given in to a slump to get a more solid feeling in her hands and forearms on the keys. As it was, she had to hold herself in place to avoid slumping.



With lowered, and lowered bench some more, and finally she felt like she can rest down. She said, "All the strain is suddenly gone."



The bench is too low for Laura, and so is the floor! Her elbows are low, and her heels are off the floor. Laura knows and likes the feeling of balancing forward toward the piano, so she's arching her back to get there. If she weren't used to the feeling of balancing forward, she would be slumped back because her heels aren't on the floor.



Two carpet samples later, and Laura's elbows look like they're in the right place, but the heel situation is worse. She has to reach even more now. This is compromising her back, which is still arched, and her hands, which are reaching to be on the keyboard.



She is looking comfortable now with the addition of a small footrest. (Shoes with high heels can help in a similar way). Forearms and hands in one piece, wrists easy and part of the one-piece hand and forearm, and hands in their natural shape, the way they are when hanging at the side.



Catherine is not set up well! Her elbows are very low, so her wrists are lifting way up out of alignment with her hand and forearm, and she's really reaching for the keys. Her toes barely touch the floor.



Catherine's shoulders inched up. These pictures, just to illustrate this common reaction in the body to a low bench. She is so obviously uncomfortable.



The first thing was add things to the bench. And add them, and add them! The elbows, wrists, and shoulders look a lot better, but she's leaning back away from the piano because her feet have nothing to rest on.



Finally, she's feeling good. With the footstool in place she feels more relaxed and comfortable this way.