

How to Obtain the Best Sitting Position at the Piano



By GéNIA

I am often asked what is the best way to sit at the piano, as various piano teachers recommend different approaches. When we watch famous musicians, we cannot help but notice how differently they sit: Glen Gould with his unbalanced low sitting position, Arthur Rubinstein with his almost perfect and static way of sitting, Lang Lang who generously uses body movements and Ivo Pogorelich who is very minimal in his physical expression... So how can we decide what is the best way to sit at the piano?

According to the Russian Piano School that I have been taught, you need to sit closer to the edge of the piano stool, with the forearms parallel to the piano, ideally keeping about 90 Degrees between your upper arm and forearm. The distance from the piano should be equal to the length of your forearm. This way gives you a freedom to move your hands correctly and without a restraint.

However, after teaching a number of students over the years and performing myself on different concert platforms, I noticed that sometimes this is not enough.

Why? Because all the pianos are different: some are loud and some are soft, some have a heavy action and some are light, additionally the acoustics of each venue vary from one another, ranging from dry, where the player needs to give more sound, to 'wet', where the sound needs to be carefully controlled, as otherwise the venue amplifies the sound.

On top of that students have different physiques, where some are tall and limber, and some are petite and prone to rigidity. Sometimes the upper body is considerably longer than the lower part, or vice versa. All this needs to be taken into consideration when you play the piano. **So how can one find the best sitting position?**

First of all there are some basic rules that apply to all body types, all kinds of pianos and all environments. This is my personal conclusion, reached after experimenting a lot on myself and with the help of my wonderful students. The method is represented in detail in my book, "*Piano-Yoga®: Transform Your Hands*" in Chapter 1: Preliminary Piano-Yoga®, Exercise 6. However, here I will give you a quick outline: the main objective for finding the best sitting position at the piano is that you need to feel grounded at all times. So what exactly does that mean and how is this achieved?

Sit, as described above, closer to the edge of your piano stool, aiming to have your forearms resting on the keyboard parallel to the floor, with a 90 Degree angle to your upper arm. Make sure that your wrists are in line with your arms and hands, and not above or below them. Keep forearm distance away from the keys.



Piano-Yoga® Sitting Routine

Start from the feet – make sure that they are firmly connected to the ground. To do that you should keep your legs a hip-width apart, with feet parallel, close to the pedals. Sit with the back straight. Lift your toes, spread them, one by one if you can, and then slowly put them down. Then continue with your heels, lifting them as high as you can and placing them slowly down.

Then **engage your abdominal area**, as it holds the spine and keeps all the energy of your body (according to the eastern philosophies). Slowly draw your abdominals in, but not too much, as you do not want to prevent your diaphragm from expanding (breathing fully).

Next, **make sure that your shoulders are down and back, if necessary**. To do this, stretch your arms, with the fingers widely spread, pointing to the floor and knuckles parallel and facing the keyboard. Hold this position for a few seconds and then turn your palms so they are now facing the keyboard. This will increase the stretch deeper, and facilitate lowering of the shoulders. If your shoulders are prone to be rolled inwards,

then pull them slightly back; however, avoid over-arching your back (as this would add the additional pressure to your lower back).



Piano-Yoga® Sitting Routine

Finally, make sure that your neck is aligned with your body and is not protruding forward.

Pulling the neck forward can lead to heightened blood pressure, headaches and even blurred vision, as well as pains in the upper shoulders.

Once you master this sequence, it will take you about 1 minute to perform, but will considerably improve the quality of your playing and facilitate the best sitting position for you.



***GéNIA playing with
Trinity College Orchestra***

To finalise the perfect sitting position for yourself, however, you would need to answer the following questions:

1. Are you a:
 - A. Beginner or
 - B. Intermediate/Advanced Player?
2. Are you establishing the sitting position for:
 - A. Your daily practice or
 - B. For performing purposes?
3. What is the acoustic of the space?
 - A. Dry
 - B. Wet
4. What is your body type?
 - A. Tall upper body
 - B. Short upper body

Here are the answers to the questions above:

1A. For the beginner, you will be unlikely to need to produce a lot of sound or exhibit strength in your playing, so all you would need is to sit correctly, trying to match the 90 degree angle between your upper arm and the keyboard on the length of the forearm so your fingers are gently resting on the keys and your wrists are in line with your arms and hands. Keep your feet parallel, with legs slightly apart. This is very important, particularly for women players, who are taught from childhood to keep their legs close together, which is appropriate in daily life, but creates tension in the hips if you are playing the piano, and hence negatively affects the playing.

1B. For Intermediate and Advanced players, you would need to analyse what pieces you are playing.

If your music has a lot of fast passages or/and big chords, it would be easier to play it sitting slightly higher, as it is less physically exhausting and makes the playing easier, however, on the downside, it will tend to encourage a few wrong notes, as your grounding will be affected and therefore your control of the instrument will be disturbed.

If you sit lower, you will be safer from the control point of view, but it will be more tiring to play. Also, you would need to watch out that your wrists don't go lower than the hands (for more than a few seconds), as this could lead to all sorts of hand problems.

2A. If you are sitting in your practice studio, then it is good to challenge yourself and work from the traditional position described above.

2B. However if you are playing in the concert hall, it is OK to work with the acoustic of the space: sit higher if you need to produce more sound, as your whole body will contribute to producing more sound (very useful for people with a small frame), or sit lower if the keys of the piano are too light and the acoustic of the space is booming, forcing you to be extra careful not to play everything loudly.

3. Please refer to the 2B answer above.

4. This is very interesting point:

4A. If your upper body is quite long, then your chair would be always placed in a lower position than the chair of someone with a shorter upper body. This is important to remember if you are performing in a concert or exam, where you are not the only person who is playing.

To be on a safe side, particularly if you do not have an opportunity to rehearse on the instrument before performing, make sure to reproduce the seating position that you adopt at home (the height of your sitting position in relation to the instrument) and try to recreate it at the new venue. You may not be able to react to the factors like the touch of the instrument or acoustic of the venue, but at least you will feel more grounded, which is so essential for a confident performance.

4B. Please refer to the answer in 4A

At the end of the day, establishing the best seating position is a very individual factor, as many of us have unbalanced right and left sides, different physique, various hearing abilities and many other factors, so it is always very interesting and rewarding to find the position that works best for you. This is why various great performers sit completely differently. The correct seating position could considerably improve the quality of your playing without you even practicing! If you follow the guidelines above you will definitely be on the right track.

Here is an excellent example of the optimum seating position - Artur Rubinstein.

Happy Practising & Enjoy Finding your Unique Position!

Russian born virtuoso concert pianist and composer GÉNIA originally founded her Piano-Yoga® method in response to the challenge of attempting to learn and perform Rachmaninoff's 'Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini'. GÉNIA's first teacher was her great grand mother, the renown pedagogue Regina Horowitz, sister of pianist Vladimir Horowitz. Following her studies in London at the Guildhall School of Music, GÉNIA performed worldwide and released a number of albums on Black Box, Nonclassical and her own label. Combining her artistic career with Piano-Yoga® work, GÉNIA gives masterclasses, workshops and Piano-Yoga® retreats worldwide, as well as running her Piano-Yoga® studio in Central London. GÉNIA's Piano-Yoga® book was featured in her live series of Piano-Yoga® lessons on BBC London Radio 94.9. Learn more at www.genia-music.com /