

FOCUS TRACK: KEYBOARD / PIANO

Though it is nowhere near as *mobile* as the acoustic guitar, the keyboard / piano is a timeless and versatile instrument often used when leading worship. If you are a keyboard / piano player, or a Worship Leader who is trying to speak their language and give them direction, here are some helpful tips to keep in mind (appearing in no particular order).

The **fundamental frequencies** for a properly tuned 88 key piano range from 27.5Hz at the low A all the way to nearly 4.2kHz at the high C. That is an incredible span of frequencies! Taking into consideration that most keyboards have myriad other sounds available, there is no telling what frequencies you may venture in to. This reality is one of the factors that make the keyboard / piano so versatile. Of course, having the ability to play in so many frequencies does not necessitate that you should actually play in all of those frequencies!



The **dynamic range** of a classic acoustic piano is nearly as impressive as its frequency range. An acoustic piano can play beautifully soft one moment and thunderously loud the next. In fact, all of this can happen within the same musical phrase depending on how hard you are playing the instrument and whether or not you are utilizing its pedals. Again, this makes the keyboard / piano an incredibly versatile instrument. However, it should be noted that many keyboard players struggle to access this same dynamic range and feel on the electronic versions of an acoustic piano. That's probably okay, because it is very rare that you would need access to such a dynamic range in a typical worship team setting, anyway.

The “**musical buddy**” for the keyboard / piano depends on how the instrument is being played. If the piano is functioning as a foundational rhythm instrument, then its musical buddy would tend to be the **acoustic guitar**, **hi hat**, or even the **bass guitar**. If the keyboard is serving more of a secondary role, then its musical buddy would be the **lead vocals** (along with the **electric guitar** or other **auxiliary instruments**). Always remember to pay attention to and play well with your musical buddy, leaving space for them to really shine! It is an ugly world when buddies fail to get along, and the keyboard / piano player has a lot of potential musical buddies!

If you are sitting down to play the keyboard / piano, you may want to **consider sitting on your left hand!** If you are standing, go ahead and lock it into your left pocket. I am kidding, of course, but not really. When you are playing keyboard or piano by yourself, adding the left hand brings a beautiful tonal balance to the instrument. Using the left hand can even provide that groovy bass rhythm that we all love. However, when playing in the context of the band, part of the trick for the keyboard / piano player is to figure out which frequency range they should hang out in. Remember that the keyboard / piano uniquely has easy access to an impressive span of frequencies, which means in can fit just right into a full band mix -or it can quickly make the mix muddy! An easy way to avoid the mud is by sitting on your left hand and playing your right hand in the octave above the acoustic guitar (typically an octave *above* Middle C, which rings through at around 260Hz).

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If you are playing a keyboard, you probably have **access to more sounds** than you realize! Occasionally the Worship Leader will ask for a xylophone sound, or strings, or organ. Your keyboard probably has those sounds! Take some time on your own to play through the vast sound library at your fingertips, and take notes along the way. You never know when you may be asked to pull up a sound that only you can provide.

One of the sounds that the keyboard player has unique access to is called a **soft pad**. The soft pad is a sustained musical texture that just sits nicely under the mix and provides a pleasant atmospheric feeling to the listener. This works well during a song, but also between songs as the Worship Leader is speaking or leading in to the next song. A soft pad may consist of only a couple of notes (typically the 1 and 5 note of a chord), and you definitely do not want to hold down the sustain pedal while switching chords, or both chords may jumble together as one.

Depending on your keyboard setup, you may be able to **layer different sounds**. This approach would allow you to play, as an example, an acoustic piano as the main instrument with a soft pad or strings sound layered beneath it. In this example, when you play a chord, you will hear the prominent acoustic piano chord, but will also hear the soft pad or strings playing the same chord. There are countless ways to layer sounds -especially if you are using a keyboard with built-in faders or a computer with a midi controller. This approach may take a bit of research and practice to figure out, but the payoff is worth it!

If the sound system you are playing through is running in stereo, **consider running a stereo output from your keyboard**. Especially if you are using any stereo sound effects like reverb or delay. This will create a depth of sound that mono simply cannot effectively emulate. If the sound system is running in mono, just use the left output from your keyboard. The left output is the standard output for mono (though some devices intentionally used the right output for mono and have specifically marked their device accordingly).

Because the keyboard has so many sounds to choose from, you will want to **pay attention to the volume difference between sounds, and make adjustments accordingly**. It is not overly conducive to the worship experience when a keyboard player switches from a low volume, soft pad to a raucous, high volume B3 organ. This kind of adjustment sends sound men scurrying to find the fader while well-meaning worshipers lift their hands in fright -rather than in worship. This is really *not* the effect we are striving for.