

USC Thornton

School of Music

Piano Policy and Use Guidelines As of Fall 2019

**General Policy
Harpsichords
Extended Techniques
Extended Techniques Protocol**

A GUIDE TO PIANOS AT THE USC THORNTON SCHOOL OF MUSIC

General Policy for Piano and Harpsichord Use and Service

All pianos and harpsichords at the USC Thornton School of Music are for the use of faculty, staff, and active university students with a Major or Minor in Music OR registered for Applied Lessons and/or music class(es) for University-related activities only. See Rule Number 9 below for harpsichord use exceptions.

Rules for piano usage include the following:

- 1. Food and Drink are forbidden on our pianos. This includes any open or closed containers of any kind, including those containing plain water or that are empty.**
- 2. Please keep items such as large instruments, instrument cases, book-bags, backpacks, umbrellas, etc. off of the pianos. This is to reduce the risk of case (piano lid) damage.**
- 3. In classrooms and faculty studios, keep the piano clear of **items such as valuable instruments, bows, artwork, sculptures, books, etc.** There are safety concerns to consider such as FMS access for any emergencies that might arise in the space. The time budgeted for tuning the piano does not include removing and replacing these items.**



The photo above was taken in 2014, when a soda spill damaged all the bass strings on a grand piano in the UGW Practice Facility. The room had to be closed while replacement strings were installed, at significant expense to both our budget and to students who were unable to use this room during peak UGW hours.

6. Do not attempt to retrieve lost items from inside a piano yourself. If you have an immediate need, call Music Operations at 213-740-6444; they can locate a piano technician on your behalf (please be prepared to provide building, room number, and piano location if there is more than one piano in the space). Your timely report of an object dropped inside a piano will prevent any further damage.

7. Report broken strings. Your swift report of a broken string is crucial. Submit a report as soon as possible via music.usc.edu/pianorequest.

8. Permission to use a harpsichord for a recital or other performance must be obtained from Dr. Lucinda Carver, Vice-Dean, Classical Studies. This must be indicated by her signature on your submitted Production Packet.

We encourage all of the Thornton community to participate in conserving our pianos and harpsichords for the next generation of Trojan musicians. Thank you and fight on!

Extended Techniques Performance Piano Use Policy

The **Extended Techniques Piano Use** policy is centered on three pillar tenets:

1. Activities allowed without prior consultation
 2. Activities triggering consultation with Piano Technology staff
 3. Strict preservation (no extended techniques allowed) of one concert instrument (NRH 600) and one Thornton concert instrument in Cammilleri Hall managed by the Brain Creativity Institute
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1. Activities allowed without prior consultation include the following:
 - *With sustain pedal engaged*: plucking, striking, and strumming of steel strings only – not copper bass strings – with dry and clean fingers, hands, and fingernails
 - *With sustain pedal engaged*: Cluster-chords using hands or arms (with reasonable force)
 - Non-aggressively knocking or slapping case parts with hands or fists only.
 - “Strumming,” “Plucking,” or tapping key tops and/or tuning pins
 2. Activities triggering consultation with TSOM Piano Technology:
 - Any activities outside of the aforementioned will initiate the need for a prior consultation with a TSOM piano technician. **This includes touching bass strings.** Contact music.pianotech@usc.edu as soon as possible.
 - Consultations are necessary so that we may better assess your needs. Thornton Piano Technology is available to make recommendations about which materials are better for physical contact with the piano.
 - In the event your techniques trigger the use of the designated substitute concert grand (also a Steinway Model D #470), we will require advance notice to coordinate moving the piano.
 3. Strict preservation (no extended techniques allowed) of one concert instrument (NRH 600):
 - One concert instrument will not be available for any Extended Techniques usage so as to best preserve the nuance/detail work of our technicians and the very particular concerns/requests of some of our faculty and students: Steinway & Sons Model D #600 in Newman Recital Hall.

PROTOCOL FOR EXTENDED TECHNIQUES PIANO PERFORMANCE

Prepared by members of the College and University Technicians Committee of the Piano Technicians Guild, in consultation with various pianists and composers.

Extended techniques piano use requires the performer to produce sound by means other than, or in addition to, playing the keys. Techniques employed include strumming, bowing, and/or striking the strings, and sometimes striking wooden parts of the case. This can be done either using fingers and hands or hand held objects. Prepared piano use generally requires adding objects to the string system and other parts of the piano. Extended techniques and prepared use often require making marks on parts of the piano and strings.

The use of extended techniques has been a source of conflict between pianists, composers, and piano technicians. The purpose of this document is to lay the groundwork for better communication and understanding, recognizing that extended techniques are a legitimate part of musical performance, but that ***they have the potential to cause damage to the instrument.***

We take it for granted that we always strive to provide a composer and/or pianist with a piano of high quality when a piano is used conventionally. It is no less important that a composer and pianist have a suitable instrument to make music using extended techniques. It is not in the best interest of the art to provide inferior pianos for any performance. When at all possible, a piano in very good working order should always be provided for extended techniques use. Most often, that can be a piano routinely used for most concert use, but sometimes it will make sense to substitute a different piano.

We all need to bear in mind that a concert piano is a shared resource. It represents an expensive investment of both money and continual maintenance on the part of the piano technician, and both its appearance and high-level function have considerable importance to the institution and to all who use it. Even a very minor mechanical defect, like a slightly displaced damper, can make the piano unusable for performance until the defect has been remedied. Methods of marking that seem innocuous, like the use of pencil, blackboard chalk, or masking tape, can leave permanent damage to the finish, or can be difficult or impossible to remove completely. There are also risks of considerably more serious damage associated with carelessly executed extended techniques. **Bass strings are particularly vulnerable to damage.**

INSIDE/EXTENDED TECHNIQUES AGREEMENT

1. The piano technician must approve all structural changes to any piano.

This includes removing the lid or other case parts and attaching anything to strings or soundboard to modify the sound.

2. Touching the strings

If the strings will be touched by fingers or hands (harmonics, plucking, rubbing), hands should be washed first. For moderate use of these techniques, a reasonable amount (not too much) of powdered talc may be applied to the hands to help prevent the transfer of oil from skin to the strings. Thin gloves should be worn for extensive contact with the strings.

3. Marking

Chalk may be used on the plain wire but never on the wound bass strings. Never use masking tape or any other adhesive that may leave a residue. Sticky-note paper, Post-It strips/flags are the preferred material to use for marking dampers, agraffes, or strings. To mark a string node, a thin (1/8") strip of the adhesive part of a sticky note or a mailing label can be worked around the string and stuck to itself. Other than small stickies and chalk, nothing should be applied directly to the strings. This includes whiteout, tape, crayon, stickers, nail polish, etc. The performer is responsible for removing any stickers immediately after any performance.

4. Dampers

Care must always be used when touching dampers as they are easily damaged or displaced. Sticky-note paper, Post-It strips/flags or small dot labels are preferred material to use for marking dampers. Never use chalk or pencil or white-out. The performer is responsible for carefully removing any stickers immediately after any performance.

5. Malleable substances on strings

Bostik Blu-Tack, Scotch Removable Mounting Putty, or like products are the only malleable substances acceptable for direct application to the strings. The piano technician must approve all other substances.

6. Screws and bolts (this use will automatically trigger the deployment of the Thornton designated inside technique Steinway D)

In some cases, literature calls for the insertion of screws or other items between piano strings. Proper protocol must be followed when inserting screws with the instruction and approval of a Thornton piano technician..

7. Striking and plucking strings

Strings may be struck or plucked with fingers or guitar pick. Other devices must always be a material that will not mar or scratch strings. On steel strings only, materials that are softer than the steel string, such as brass or aluminum, may be used. Copper wound bass strings must be struck or plucked with a material softer than copper (copper is much softer than steel).

Acceptable materials might include wood, plastic, rubber and felt mallets. The general rule is that the material should not be harder than the strings. Never use a steel chisel or screwdriver on piano strings (a substitute may be made from brass stock). The piano technician will help any performer in selecting materials that will not damage the piano.

8. Clean up

The pianist should clean up after performance and leave the piano in the same condition it was found. Nothing should be left in the piano. Do not, however, risk damaging the piano for the sake of clean up. If you need assistance removing something please contact the piano technician.

9. Damage avoidance using sound and prudent judgment

Most damage to pianos can easily be avoided by using good judgment and knowledge of the piano. Please consult with the piano technician before using extended techniques. If you are composing a piece using extended techniques, consult with the piano technician to ascertain what is safe. Usually alternatives to potentially destructive methods can be found to satisfy both the performer and this policy.

All performers using inside/extended techniques will be asked to fill out the [Inside / Extended Techniques Agreement](#) after consulting with a piano technician. Performers will be held financially responsible for any damage that occurs on Thornton instruments when employing inside techniques.

USC Thornton Piano Technology Office
University Gateway:
UGW P116 (Piano Shop)
Piano Shop (213) 821-2365
music.pianotech@usc.edu