

It was my pleasure recently to tour Hollywood Piano Company, in Burbank, California, and to play four models of Baldwin piano on display there. Two of the models, introduced a few years ago, were very affordable uprights priced under \$10,000; the other two, released more recently, were mid-level grands priced under \$30,000. Having grown up practicing on a Baldwin upright—my first piano—and playing on a Baldwin grand in church while in high school, I was curious to see how the company’s products had evolved since my earliest years of playing.

Beginning with the largest and most expensive, I sampled a 6’ 3” BP190 grand, which had a truly marvelous dynamic range across the entire keyboard. The key dip felt a bit shallow, as I recall it did on many Baldwin pianos past, yet I can’t remember ever sampling a Baldwin with so many tonal colors, or one so well suited to the full range of repertoire, from Bach and Chopin to Rachmaninoff and Joplin. I was very impressed by its ability to repeat notes fast and reliably, and by the clean cutoff of sound when keys were released. The pedal movement was a little shallow compared to that of a Steinway, for example, but easy to control. For volume control, the lid prop featured a mini-stick in addition to the standard half- and full-stick options—perfectly suited to accompanying singers and violinists who appreciate the richness and fullness of a grand but don’t like it overly loud. The BP190 had a wonderfully orchestral sonority, and was much less percussive than the Japanese pianos I’m accustomed to playing in schools. As it could easily be mistaken for a 7’ grand, it would be a fine piano for a church or small concert hall, but would also be well suited for a high-class living room, studio, classroom, or choral room. The sample I played, situated in Hollywood’s performance space, was finished in high-gloss ebony, and was as beautiful to look at as it was to play. It would be an excellent choice for use in a full-length recital.

Baldwin’s 5’ 10” BP178 grand was very close in quality to the BP190, and, like that model, is a great fit for pianists of all levels. It very much reminded me of the 5’ 7” Steinway M in my home, and could easily be mistaken for a 6’ or larger piano. The sample I played, finished in high-gloss ebony, had definite class and sophistication.

The bass had an unexpected power, richness, and depth, making the Brahms Opp. 118 and 119 very satisfying to play. The upper register had a wonderful natural brightness without being too percussive; its clear, clean sound made it a wonderful choice for the Chopin A-minor Étude, Op.10 No.2. I found the action light, nimble, and easy to control, with excellent repetition. As such, it would be a fabulous pick for anyone who likes to practice



Chopin études without difficulty or strain. I played the F-Major Étude, Op.10 No.8, and the piece had never felt easier to play. In addition to the Chopin, I especially enjoyed the sounds of Gershwin, Mozart, and Prokofiev on this instrument, and bringing out different voices was effortless when playing Bach. Of the four pianos I sampled that day, the BP178's pedal had the greatest depth of travel, and changed the tonal color the most dramatically. The BP178 would be a great instrument for teaching, and reminds me of the best comparably sized Kawais I have played. I would highly recommend it in the mid-priced grand category.

For those shopping for a superior vertical piano, Baldwin has done some very creative things to make the vertical not seem like one. When I sampled the 52" B252 upright, I was surprised how much it had in common with the grands. Easy to play, it also had excellent dynamic range, color, and sensitivity—due, I suspect, to the longer strings that its greater height makes possible. I was especially excited about its lyricism as I played a Chopin nocturne, and its tonal colors in Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. Given the inherent limitations of a vertical piano action, the rapidly repeated notes in Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* were admittedly tricky, but certainly possible when the tempo was kept under control. I loved its sound in Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata, finding it equally favorable in both loud and soft dynamic ranges. The bass notes tended to ring a bit after being forcefully played staccato; however, with additional regulation, I predict that this issue could be easily solved. As one who frequently rehearses on upright pianos in schools, I would gladly take the B252 in trade for the pianos of other makes I often have to play. This sample, in satin black, looked very classy; the B252 should be ideal for home use, individual practice, or ensemble rehearsal in the studio.

Baldwin also offers the B243, a 47" institutional studio upright that, at less than \$7,000, is very affordable, and that handled sophisticated repertoire much better than one would expect from an upright. I felt I could "dig in" with the keys more on this piano than on the other models I played; however, it didn't produce as wide a dynamic range of sound. The walnut-finished sample I tried handled technical pieces better than lyrical ones, as its action would not allow for as nuanced a touch as the other models. For example, I found the B243 very satisfying for works such as Liszt's Piano Concerto No.1, with its third movement's light yet difficult-to-control fingertip-intensive passages in fast 16th notes; while less successful in a coloristic piece such as Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. It also tended to ring a bit after the pedal was released, but I was assured that this could be improved with additional

BALDWIN MODELS REVIEWED

Prices for models in ebony finish

Model	Size	MSRP
BP190	6' 3"	\$ 38,385.00
BP178	5' 10"	\$ 30,385.00
B252	52"	\$ 11,495.00
B243	47"	\$ 9,265.00

regulation. The B243's action, though not at the level of a top-tier grand, had impressive repetition for an upright, and I was surprised, given the piano's deeper key dip, how easily I could play both the repeating and glissando passages in Ravel's extremely demanding *Alborada del Gracioso*, something I normally would be afraid to attempt on an upright. This would be an ideal practice piano for the home or studio, and an excellent buy for schools.

All in all, my trip to Hollywood Piano Company encouraged me as to the evolution of the Baldwin brand. My experiences with Baldwin two decades ago were that the company produced pianos musically inferior to those from Boston, Kawai, and Yamaha; this latest experience demonstrated that Baldwin instruments currently compare very favorably to those brands. The Baldwins also tend to be well priced; these pianos are excellent buys. I can hardly wait to play Baldwin's larger grands as they become available—I'm fascinated to see how the company's changes have influenced their highest-end pianos. If they're anything like the BP190 and BP178, I'm sure to be most satisfied. 🎹

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