

# *AMBIENCE AND PIANO MUSIC*

**In HOTELS, RESTAURANTS and PIANO BARS**

**A guide for hotel managers, hotel staff, agents, pianists  
and guests who frequent piano venues**

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I would like to thank my good friend and very fine jazz pianist **Alan Rogers** (also German >English translator and editor of technical, scientific and medical texts: [www.alanrogers.ch](http://www.alanrogers.ch)) for his helpful suggestions in the writing of these notes. The opinions expressed are all mine, however, as is the blame for any errors that may nevertheless have slipped through.

## **Why did I write this?.....To explain the following points:**

1. **To preserve the culture of piano music for future generations.**
2. Machines are replacing the real piano players.
3. Guests and locales are being cheated by 'pianists' using electronics.
4. Pianists looking so bored and tired..... work too many hours without breaks.
5. Guests do not communicate their pleasure when they hear a good musician to the management and their displeasure at hearing a bad or inappropriate one.
6. Ambience of most locales changes from day to day.
7. Hotels do not understand the need to create an appropriate ambience in their particular locale.
8. Staff are destroying the character of most piano locales by employing electronic 'pianists'.
9. Guests have to listen to pianists play un-tuned and inadequately maintained pianos.
10. NO RESPECT for trained and experienced bar pianists, while electronic 'pianists' are treated with MUCH RESPECT.
11. Anything put on a piano makes scratches and can affect its sound.
12. The life a pianist lives; work and practice; wage suppression.
13. Today anybody can make easy money using pre-programmed playback material, and call themselves a pianist.
14. Many classical pianists work for the money and not because they love to play in piano venues.

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**When reading this you may find that some points are often repeated:  
this is because you might choose to read only certain sections.**

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Managements and agents may have their own books to write about pianists.

But by writing these topics I am opening a discussion between all sides and trying to create an understanding of what a musician has to put up with.

**Guests will now understand the difference between:**

-a pianist who really plays every note that they hear and

-the 'pianist' who uses pre-programmed songs and does not know how to play.

## **AMBIENCE: what is it?**

### **Environment, surroundings that we like**

Whenever someone goes into a home, a hotel or on a vacation they like to have a suitable environment, surroundings and a pleasant ambience. At home you would like to have a living room where you can entertain friends and be a place to relax. You might like the TV to be in a particular place, and a couch, and of course your favourite resting chair, proper lighting, etc.

Everything should be in its right place and then you can say it is a comfortable place to relax in. One would not make the living room a bedroom or an office and entertain friends in the kitchen; the surroundings and environment and therefore the ambience would just not be right. Similarly, hotels, bars, lobbies and lounges that we frequent have to have some kind of order, just like in our home.

EXAMPLE 1. Imagine you and your partner sitting at home by the fire with a bottle of wine and having a nice conversation. The lights are low, the fire is warm, your favourite CD is playing and the ambience is just perfect for a romantic evening. That's how you would like to feel when you go to your favourite bar for a romantic evening. Another evening both of you are out on the town and decide to go to your favourite romantic bar, where you can sit by the fire and order a bottle of champagne. When you get there you find no fire, the lights are bright and it is not romantic anymore.

RESULT. What would you do? Go home where the ambience is good.

EXAMPLE 2. You are out with your friends and visit a loud party rock 'n' roll piano bar. It is so much fun, the piano player is great, you meet many new people and you go home having had a wonderful evening. Another evening you decide to go to the same bar but the piano player is playing light classical background music and it is so different you wonder what happened and you go home. The agency and management have hired the wrong pianist who doesn't play the sort of music that is expected in that bar.

**I have heard managements and agents say, 'It does not matter what music we have, we just need someone who looks good and sits behind the piano'.**

**RESULT. the venue NEVER establishes a special ambience of its own and eventually loses any guests it had to begin with, because they never know what to expect from one visit to the next.**

Each country has its own unique style of what a piano music room is made for. In North America a piano bar is where one would go to be entertained by the musician, both musically and by his stage presence and personality. A few European countries follow the same idea and so do Asian bars and hotels.

However, in a few countries, such as Switzerland, a locale has piano music for ambience. The musician is there to perform and people go there to meet friends and communicate with each other while the pianist sits in a corner providing background music. There are just a handful of bars where a pianist must be an entertainer, too.

In the last 10 years most establishments have younger managements and the music they want the musician to play is the type of music they like — loud party music: they think the louder the music is, the better the ambience! The reason for this is that the staff go to other party bars and want the same atmosphere in the places where they work, without considering that such music is completely inappropriate for the ambience of their work locale and the guests who frequent it and who in the end pay their salaries. Having had many conversations with musicians, I find time and again that **in order to keep our jobs** and get asked back again **we have firstly to please the managements and staff, and then the guests.**

**The younger generation want music to be loud and punchy, but as they get older their tastes will probably change, but there will be no places left with quiet pleasant piano music.**

Younger musicians having less experience would immediately please the staff as it would seem to be a lot of fun for all. This is a very selfish way of thinking, but with the current trends in family upbringing and the education system younger people seem to have their way and experience gets thrown into the rubbish bin.

It would be for a good thing if managements and staff were to visit other locations and observe the clientele, their age-group, what class of people are there and the ambience. Then they should analyse if what they see would match the clientele and the ambience of their locale. Some of the best ambiances are found in hotels located in the eastern world.

I must admit when I was younger I was playing elegant piano lounges and quite often visited rock 'n' roll piano rooms (like staff do). I wanted to play, sound and be like that person behind the piano and try to do the same in the rooms I worked at. I would learn the songs and of course found that the music did not fit the ambience of the venues I was then playing in.

When I was first starting out I did not understand much about this, and about ambience, but as my experience grew so did my knowledge of what music to play and when to play it. Over the years I have spoken at length to many older musicians and have learned a lot about ambience from them.

On many occasions the pianist is asked to play for dinner in a restaurant of a hotel. The piano is moved into a location that is hidden from the guests and asked to play. The reasoning seems to be that the guests are able to hear the music but do not need to see who is playing and the management are quite happy to tell the guests that the pianist is tucked away around the corner. Many guests have told me that the management has no idea of how to present live music and it shows a lack of respect to the musician. Besides, as a musician I would like to be able to choose my repertoire to suit the guests in the room and if I cannot see them, I do not know what to play.

The managers in a restaurant always seem to place older guests and people with impaired hearing closest to the piano. Then the staff wants loud modern music from the pianist. This is really ridiculous as it will only drive away the guests.

Pianists having more experience have larger repertoires and are much better suited to play in lounges, lobbies, classy restaurants and piano bars where there are better-educated guests, such as business people and executives. These musicians know what to play and can please a wide range of guests. **Communication with the guests is extremely important** and such musicians can hold a conversation on a wide variety of topics. Young musicians would not know what to talk about and just would not fit in with the ambience of the room. That is why I have seen so many young musicians get up from the piano when they take a break and leave the room entirely and return straight to the piano: they have absolutely no contact with the guests except for a hello or a smile.

A few hotels and bars in some cities are well-known as jazz piano bars. However, often when I have visited these bars to hear some jazz, there was a musician surrounded by electronic equipment that did most of the playing for him, or a pianist who played pop and rock 'n' roll music. I also noticed that when the pianist did take a break the CD music was also pop and not jazz as it should have been in a jazz bar. This is false representation and also shows a lack of understating by the management that they should hire pianists that can provide the ambience that suits the reputation of the bar.

A wellness spa hotel would normally cater to guests who go there to convalesce or relax from their busy work and life in the city. They would want peace and quiet and that is what such places should provide. When working at a few of these hotels I asked the guests what they would like me to play. They all said please keep it soft and refined. They had come especially to the wellness-hotel to relax and calm down after a busy period at home or work or to recuperate after an operation or illness. If they wanted to be in a disco, rock 'n' roll bar or electronic music bar, they would go to any of the fine places in the cities they come from, and not travel a long way and stay in a (usually) very expensive hotel.

A ship I worked on had a disco, a pub with a guitarist, a dancing room with a 6 – 10 piece band and a piano bar. The piano bar mainly attracted the middle-aged and piano music lovers. The ambience was romantic. But management wanted more out of the piano player; they wanted another pub, a sort of rock 'n' roll bar, which they already had. The customers who were piano music fans, older couples or people seeking a romantic environment had nowhere to go but to their cabin.

**The people in charge of a hotel lobby, lounge, restaurant or piano bar must know what ambience they should produce for the guests and keep it consistent. The pianist must also know what and how to play for the ambience and agents and managements must choose the right musician.**

Sometimes managements require the pianist to play in 3 – 4 locations in an evening: possibly they would start in the lobby for apero, then to the lounge for cocktails, then to the restaurant for dinner and finally the bar to end the evening. There are **VERY FEW** pianists capable of playing all these venues well. Each pianist has his/her forte. So one might end up with a rock ‘n’ roll pianist trying to play a restaurant but who would be much more suitable for the bar.

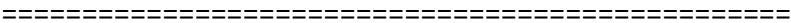
As is always the case when a pianist is used to please too many locations in a hotel for many hours a day, the guests have too much of the same sound. Besides, once the guest has heard the musician in the lobby and restaurant they will probably not want to listen to the same musician for another hour in the bar. Here is where smart managements would have a second pianist rather than lose the guests to another hotel.

In this fashion, guests know the ambience of a room they want to go to in advance and what type of music they will hear before they get there. The musicians may change but the style and ambience will be the same.

The different types of bars for piano are described in these topics and can be a guide for you as a manager, staff member, agent, pianist or guest.

***Compared to most other countries, almost all the managements of Swiss hotels, lounges and bars having piano music have absolutely no idea of ambience and as most of the hotel management schools are located in Switzerland, the hotels should be setting a good example of ambience. The absence of ambience may not seem a big thing, but the gradual decline of customers in places having piano music will leave a big hole in the industry.***

The following topics explain how the ambience in many places we frequent can be improved so that every time we go there it will always be the same, unless there is a major renovation.



## **LIGHTING FOR AMBIENCE**

**Lighting in bars, restaurants, lobbies can play a very big role in the ambience of the particular room.**

Depending on their mood of the day, the management or staff decides it is too dark or too bright and change the lighting as they please. On many occasions I have spoken to customers who came to a bar, restaurant or lobby regularly at a certain hour to read the newspaper, conduct a business meeting, or just because they just liked the lighting and ambience. Suddenly they are confronted with new lighting, which changes from day to day, and it is difficult to read their newspaper.

Eventually they find other places and the establishment loses these guests. On the other hand, guests who enjoyed the romantic ambience of a room having dim lights have to find another place as the lights and ambience in their favourite bar now changes every day.

**In the technological world of today, there are timers and sensors available so that hotels, restaurants and bars can provide a constant lighting and ambience for the guests.**

No matter if it is cloudy, rainy, snowing or bright sunshine outside, the level of the lighting will remain the same. Just like the quality, presentation and consistency of your favourite meal, lighting should be consistent. Maybe the lighting gradually dims after a certain hour in the evening, but it must be the same every day. Today's automatic controls can respond to the natural light from outside and the technology should be used by hotels and restaurants.

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## ARCHITECTURAL AMBIENCE FAILURES

Musicians can only dream of a place to play that has an adequate power supply, good lighting, maybe a stage, a neat stand for a sound mixer and amplifier, a small table for the musician's drink, and where all the unsightly cables could be very neatly tucked away. When everything looks and feels good and organised, the musician can give of their best. Each day the musician has to just turn on one switch and everything is ready to go.

**Most bars, hotels and restaurants I have played at have design failures.** Architects have designed a beautiful bar and then after it is built the management is confronted with the problem of where to put the piano and pianist. Eventually the pianist is hidden away to play a 'lonely corner blues'.

The acoustics of rooms or bars that are going to feature musical entertainment is often overlooked when they are designed, which frequently results in the music and the conversation of the people in the room being engaged in a sort of war to make themselves heard. Redesigning the bar using, for instance, the modern architectural fabrics having sound-absorbing and lighting properties, such as the innovative range made by the Swiss firm SEFAR would make a vast improvement in such cases.

([www.sefar.com](http://www.sefar.com))

*Fabrics are an ideal basis to function as a supporting material due to their ability to combine specific functionalities with technical fabric properties. This means that new variations of these combinations can often yield new properties and innovative solutions for numerous applications.*

*Whether in technical light applications, **acoustic or esthetic applications in architecture and interior design or for sensory functions in electronic equipment** - you will be continually amazed by the creative possibilities of Sefar fabrics. (From the SEFAR website)*

I once played in a place where the management decided to introduce piano music but there was no place for a piano except near the entrance to the toilet where a spotlight illuminated the word 'toilet' above the pianist.

In another situation the piano was placed in a hallway between the restaurant and bar and the pianist could not please both bar and restaurant customers, for whom different styles were suitable.

In some places the bar was called a 'piano bar' and the piano was placed in a corner of the room. The pianist was like a little child punished and asked to do an assignment and be quiet.

Just as in the topic of **lighting**, there is often no presentation of the musician as a feature of the room and no power supply provided for them. It would have been better to have music from a CD player in these situations.

**EXAMPLE.** A major hotel that had a piano lounge in the bar underwent a big renovation, but when the hotel re-opened the management found the piano could no longer fit in the bar. This major architectural mistake resulted in the piano being placed by a stairway between the bar and restaurant. Finally the management took away the piano as it was impossible to satisfy the differing demands of both bar and restaurant.

There are many rooms that were not designed to have live music but later added a pianist. In some rooms, because of their shape and size, the guests nearest to the piano might find the music too loud and the ones further away cannot hear anything. It would have been better for the management to install a speaker system so the sound of the music would be evenly distributed. (SEE TOPIC ON DIGITAL vs ACOUSTIC)

Architects designing hotels and restaurants have to keep in mind that someday the room might be used for an event with music and have all the cables and speakers installed so there is no patch-up job to be done later resulting in cables lying around the floor.

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## **LIVE MUSIC AND MUSAK??**

It is extremely irritating to have musak over the house system, and at times radio music from staff areas, when the musician is trying to perform. It is very degrading for the musician and shows a lack of consideration to the guests who have to listen to both the background music and the live music.

Once again architects have access and knowledge of technical equipment available to cut off musak when the musician starts to play. It would not matter so much if it was a loud band playing, but when a solo pianist is trying to play and musak is also playing over the house system it can be extremely irritating for the musician and the guests.

At times hotels have other events happening in an adjoining room and the pianist has also to play at the same time, but the music from the other room is also heard where the pianist is playing. This too can be very frustrating for the pianist and also for the guests. Managements seem not to realise this and force the pianist to play anyway, just because they feel the pianist is getting paid, so he should play even though this shows no consideration for the pianist or the guests.

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## **ACOUSTIC PIANO MUSIC**

**Just a piano and a voice are all about ‘acoustic’.** The ability of the pianist to play, to sing and to know how to entertain the guests in the right ambience is live music at its best.

**Most acoustic piano venues tend to have mild jazz players who can also play other styles.**

The reason for this is that old jazz standards played on a piano will not disturb the clientele and with improvisation on the melodies the guests have music that is not obtrusive. Improvisation of a melody is extremely important as a guest might recognise a song and the improvisation is an embellishment of the melody.

It also gives the pianist a chance to be a bit creative and not merely a flesh-and-blood machine churning out the same thing every day. Some guests will be there just to listen to the music of a good mild jazz player who also keeps the ambience of the room and enjoys creative improvisation of popular standard melodies.

Most light jazz players are able to interpret a song in different ways and that keeps it interesting for the guests and also for the ambience of the room.

Then there are classical pianists who become lobby, lounge and bar pianists. They tend to play a lot of classical music and some of them do it very well. It is a pity that they could not get into the concert scene.

**But classical music in a bar is usually out of place.** People usually go to a bar to relax, to entertain and to have fun. I have seen a few classical pianists play in bars and lounges but often the room is turned into a concert hall where the guests felt embarrassed to talk and sometimes even to move: that is not how a bar is meant to be.

Try playing Tchaikovsky in a bar. It should be played in the way the composer wanted it to be played. That would be extremely disturbing to guests trying to hold a conversation or do business.

Classical music belongs in a concert hall or house concert. The occasional mild classical melody can be suitable for playing in a bar if it is played quietly and melodically and kept in accordance with the ambience of the room.

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## **ELECTRONIC PIANO MUSIC?**

There are just a few pianists who like to, for instance, have the sound of a bass and drums playing along with them: but they can produce very good live entertainment as they are really able to play the piano properly with flair and personality and are also able to be entertaining.

Most piano players have spent years training to do their job. Some even began their training at the age of four and know very well that they will continue learning until the day they die.

The introduction of electronic keyboards, computer-generated backings and the **availability of FREE midi files on the internet** have made it very easy for an unskilled pianist to call themselves a piano player and work even some of the finest hotels. (As the same arrangements are used by most midi file players, one might as well put on a CD with the original tracks). As they may be able to sing quite well, there will always be a place that will accept them for a contract and it is an easy way for them to earn money and to provide a future for themselves and their family.

***The non-musician may not understand electronic music so here is a brief description.***

Many hotels that need a small band but cannot afford to pay 5 musicians use a one-man-band. In this case the pianist is paid to simulate a band.

A keyboard can be programmed to play every instrument that you would find in an orchestra; even the melody line can be played by the machine.

Thousands of songs normally played where you would find piano entertainment are pre-programmed and are **available FREE on the internet**. These are called MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) files, which are created on a computer that transmits them to a sound module, which produces the sounds that are then sent to the loudspeakers. Some musicians have recorded these midi files on to mini-disc or CD and therefore have to carry less when moving from job to job. Others use a laptop computer.

Live entertainment is 'live' only when the pianist plays with personality and when the music comes from the heart and soul of the performer. **A machine can produce the sounds of all instruments, it may be loud and have a beat but the TEN FINGERS of a pianist cannot produce all that.** A so-called musician 'playing' using an almost identical copy of the original recording tracks has no personal input, no soul and no personality input into the music and therefore one might as well put on the original CD recording like a DJ does instead of cheating the public by claiming they are presenting live music.

**This means that these days a lot of so-called musicians are making money cheating the public and do not have to really learn to play the piano. Anyone having no knowledge of piano playing can call themselves a pianist and earn a living because agents and managements will hire anyone so long as they are cheap. Some of the guests have stopped frequenting piano music rooms as they have realised they are being cheated: hopefully more people will find out after reading articles like this.**

**Misrepresentation can sometimes be a criminal offence and this comes pretty close to it.**

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## **HOW DID ELECTRONIC BARS START?**

Many years ago there were bars that had a small trio or quartet and people went there to dance. Over the years, with the introduction of playback and keyboards, **one-man-bands** arrived and saved the establishment a lot of money. These places then turned into electronic piano bars.

Nowadays it can simulate going to the performance of a famous act. The back-up band (electronic) is good and the pianist generally a good singer. This type of bar is usually lively and has the ambience of being at a pop concert.

The type of music heard here would be **pop, top 40, party music** and it is mostly patronised by a younger clientele and a few older rock 'n' rollers.

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## **What is a PIANO BAR?**

The piano bar originated in North America. Most people assume that it is a bar that sells alcoholic drinks and there is a pianist playing a grand piano.

***A traditional PIANO BAR is where there is a narrow flat surface built around a grand piano, and following its shape,*** so that guests can sit around it, have a drink, and be able to chat with the pianist while he plays. With this intimate ambience, everyone is bound to have a pleasant evening.

*Unfortunately, many hotel bars and bars have a piano and it is called a 'piano bar'.*

*Many years ago a piano locale was mainly jazz oriented but as fashions and tastes changed, so did the locale.*

*These are the current styles available:*

1. PIANO BAR
2. A PUB WITH A PIANO
3. PIANO LOUNGE
4. PIANO LOBBY
5. PIANO RESTAURANT
6. DUELLING PIANO BAR

**THERE IS AN ACOUSTIC AND AN ELECTRONIC VERSION OF EACH OF THE ABOVE.**

**I have not heard of any classical piano bars as the bar staff would not be able to sell anything while a pianist plays.**

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## **ACOUSTIC PIANO BAR**

A grand piano, a pianist, and elegant guests sitting around the piano bar, and everyone having a good time: the interaction, communication, jokes and music all make for a pleasant evening. There is a pleasant intimacy between the guests and the entertainer.

**The traditional piano bar has a narrow flat surface that follows the shape of a grand piano at which bar stools are put** so that the guests can chat to the pianist. There are no electronics in a traditional piano bar. Here the emphasis is on the personality and ability of the performer. The pianist has to have a large repertoire, a unique style and the personality to be able to communicate with the clientele. The emphasis is on how the entertainer interacts with the audience.

The pianist's personality, communication and performance make the piano bar special. The pianist can control the room and ambience and can generate good business for the management.

The pianist is generally older with much experience and is able to deal with any situation or even have quick-witted replies to hecklers. He/she has to have a pleasant personality, and because there is no help from outside sources (like electronics) the performer has to be an accomplished pianist/singer, must have an extensive repertoire and must be entertaining.

Entertainment in piano bars can be very varied depending on the entertainer and their style. Jokes, changing lyrics, singalongs, a lot of requests and guest singers all help make a very entertaining evening and make guests want to return.

Many a pianist who has a good fan club has been able to play one room for years. Very few can do this job, and they are unfortunately slowly getting to be fewer and fewer. If done properly, though, this style of piano bar will be something that will never die and will always generate good business for the owner.

**Type of music played** in a traditional piano bar are **light jazz standards, evergreens, easy listening, ragtime, novelty piano, blues, Latin, etc., etc.**

The music must be good, not too loud and the pianist uses their own style of communication to generate an ambience. The lights are usually low and there might be a small dance floor for the romantic couples who might like a little cuddle...

The clientele is generally middle-aged+ and well-educated and therefore need a more sophisticated music and entertainment.

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## **PUB WITH A PIANO**

This is a British-style pub that has a piano. There might be a resident pianist or some of the customers get up and play a few songs and everyone knows the lyrics and sings along.

It can be a lot of fun in a pub, as it is not a stiff ambience such as is found in a sophisticated lounge of a 5-star hotel.

The clientele are of all ages and the atmosphere is very lively.

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## **ACOUSTIC ROCK 'N' ROLL PIANO BAR**

This is another sort of bar where the pianist sings and plays piano. Once again there is no electronics in the traditional rock 'n' roll piano bar. It is up to the pianist to generate a party atmosphere with their playing and voice. The bar is generally noisy and, just like rock 'n' roll, the music has to be loud. Here the quietness of a piano bar is not heard. It is loud, and a big party. The piano player has to be a good singer and a good rock 'n' roll player and be able to communicate with the audience.

**Type of music** heard in a rock 'n' roll piano bar is loud party piano music.

The clientele would be younger mixed with some older guests who were in their teens when rock 'n' roll was in.

**The piano would have to be tuned and well serviced every 1 – 2 months** as the pianist has to really play this type of music with a lot of energy and obviously hitting the keys pretty hard. The piano might also have to be replaced every year or two as the action inside the piano is put to the test daily for 4 – 5 hours.

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## **ACOUSTIC PIANO LOUNGE**

What is a piano lounge? It is a bar that has grand piano. Here the guests are not encouraged to sit round the piano, so they sit at tables and at the bar.

A piano lounge is usually a quiet place where business meetings are arranged and friends meet with the soothing sounds of a piano in the background. There is no singing required in a lounge, but as every lounge can be different, the pianist might sing the occasional song later in the evening.

**The pianist is generally older with experience, plays quietly** and with their style can create an ambience that allows people to chat and conduct their business. The pianist is not there to entertain as they would in a piano bar, though there might be a few occasions later in the evening when it is called for.

The type of music heard in a piano lounge **jazz standards, easy listening pop, Latin**, all styles played very unobtrusively.

The type of guests in a lounge would be business people, company executives and people using it as a place to meet, so the music has to be of good quality and discreet.

Once again, mixing electronics with acoustic playing would be unsuitable for this clientele.

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## **ACOUSTIC PIANO LOBBY BAR**

Most upper-class hotels have a lobby where people can wait for other guests, meet with friends, have a quick snack or drink and the background sound of a good pianist can be very soothing and enhance the ambience. Clientele of all ages are to be found there.

**In a hotel lobby the clientele do not want to be disturbed** while they are waiting for friends, for a business meeting, reading a newspaper or book and the creative sounds from a good pianist can be a soothing background.

**In most lobbies singing would be a big distraction** to the clientele. Any form of electronic playback would sound really out of place and destroy the ambience of the room. The natural sound of a (well-tuned) grand piano in a lobby, lounge or restaurant adds much more class to the establishment. When the management has the right pianist for the room, the ambience will immediately reflect the quality of the hospitality provided by the establishment.

In most major hotels there is always a cocktail hour (also known as the apero), which might take place in the lobby bar where a pianist plays. The music heard at this time is very similar to that which one normally hears in a lobby; easy-to-listen-to unobtrusive music.

A pianist with many years of experience and naturally older will be more capable of playing the quiet, creative, smooth sounds while guests converse and can add a real pleasant ambience to any lobby. As a guest once said to me, the music floats like a ghost around the room while guests go about their business.

Unfortunately, many pianists who have previously played in bands and have later become piano players do not understand this and want to perform and be the showman in the room. It would be an embarrassment for the management to hire such a pianist and the guests would be annoyed as they are there to talk and to meet people.

**The type of music for a traditional lobby** should be the sounds of a pianist playing light easy-to-listen-to music like mild jazz standards, evergreens, with a mix of pop songs (that have also become standards), and a few of the various other styles if the need arises.

Singing, electronics and rock 'n' roll would be too disturbing in a place where people have come to relax and a classical concert from a lobby pianist would be totally out of place.

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## ACOUSTIC PIANO RESTAURANT

When you go out to eat, you generally go with business associates, friends or family and you want to be able to talk, discuss business and have a pleasant ambience. You do not want to be disturbed by loud music.

The restaurant pianist should be similar to that which one might find in a traditional lobby bar; older and having lots of experience. They would provide tasteful playing and certainly **no electronics**.

I have seen classical piano restaurants in some cities, but these were very big restaurants and it was like a concert where the pianist could really play such a repertoire.

However, most restaurants would prefer the smooth style of a light jazz pianist. The piano sounds are there and do not disturb the conversation. Every once in a while you might recognise a song that you like and that is good. The pianist is there to provide an ambience.

When playing in restaurants, I had to keep the music quiet, smooth and suitable for the ambience. This meant that I played a lot of melodic jazz standards and standard pop songs in a relaxed way. The guests were very pleased about the way I played songs that they recognised; they could talk and the music made their evening a perfect one.

The staff did not like this as they want hear the rhythm and beat of music they like.

The staffs have to be reminded that they are there to work and the musician is not there to please them but to please the guests. They can listen to the music they like when they leave work.

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## **NON-PIANO PLAYER**

A recent trend is to call a place a piano bar, but a guitarist or another instrument is featured. This really amounts to **misrepresentation and is cheating the guests** who patronise the place.

The musician is probably extremely good but playing guitar or another instrument when it is clearly stated to be a piano bar is a sign that the management does not know what they are doing.

It would be better to call the place a live music bar instead.

Today anybody can become a piano player in a hotel as agents and managements do not know much about music. All one has to have is a fairly good voice, some knowledge of computers and how to set up a live performance. One does not even have to know how to play a piano. A good promotion package, picture, CD (not a video on a DVD, as you will be caught cheating) and, hey presto, you are a pianist with a job.

Guests who frequent these places would seem not to be able to hear the difference, or they accept management's so-called 'know-how' of the hotel business and entertainment.

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## ELECTRONIC PIANO BAR

The **electronic piano bar** is a bar with a grand piano. The piano may be used sparingly, and almost made redundant by, the use of keyboards and a lot of **playback sounds**.

Here in most cases the performer may NOT be a piano player but relies on playback to produce the music. (A few may be accomplished pianists who prefer to simulate playing with a band, but these are very few.)

Here the emphasis is on the loudness and the beat. A strong bass and drum beat will produce the rhythm to get the audience going, just like in a concert.

As everyone has a different taste, so it goes with the type of music we wish to hear when one goes out to party. The clientele would be young and want the musician to make them feel like they are at a pop concert.

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## ELECTRONIC PIANO LOUNGE

The electronic lounge is similar to the traditional but, together with the grand piano, keyboards or playbacks are used. This simulates a mini-band but the styles of music would be quite similar to the traditional lounge. Here the musician can use the different sounds in a sound module to simulate a flute or other instruments.

The general idea of the piano or electronic lounge is a relaxed ambience where people can talk and music is in the background.

The clientele in the electronic piano lounge would be younger executives and other young people using it as a meeting place. The music would be more modern and louder but not loud enough to inhibit conversation.

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## ELECTRONIC LOBBY PIANIST

The electronic lobby would try to offer a similar ambience as the traditional lobby, but with electronics. The music would have to be soothing and background to allow people to talk, do business or read.

Trying to create a room for dancing out of a lobby defeats the purpose of a lobby.

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## **ELECTRONIC RESTAURANT PIANO MUSIC**

The electronic restaurant would be similar to the traditional but with some electronics used together with the grand piano. The pianist would use playback and play the melody of songs using different voices on the keyboard such as flutes, saxophones, etc.

So long as it is not too loud it should work.

Once again, singing in a restaurant may or may not work depending on the type of clientele and the class of the restaurant.

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## **DUELLING PIANO BAR**

Here we could have two pianists on a stage with or without electronics. It is similar to a rock 'n' roll piano bar and people can sing and dance and it's always party time.

The pianists play together and occasionally solo while the other has a short rest. It is a lot of fun when there is good team-work from the duo.

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## **TOTAL ABSENCE OF ANY AMBIENCE**

There is a huge difference between acoustic and electronic music.

There are guests who prefer acoustic and others who prefer electronic music.

Most guests like to frequent their favourite bar or restaurant where the music, food and ambience suit their taste.

But what if the **style of music changes every month**? The guests who like acoustic might be forced to listen to electronic and vice-versa. Just like the consistency of the meals on the menu, music has to be consistent and in accordance with the ambience of what the room is meant for.

**It is the ambience and consistency that makes the guests return and makes a place successful.**

There are a lot of piano lounges that change between an electronic pianist and a traditional lounge pianist on alternate months. This is when the customers get confused. The ones who like the pianist who uses electronics complain that the traditional pianist is too boring. The customers who enjoyed the ambience with the traditional pianist say it is too loud with the piano player and their electronics.

### EXAMPLE

A disco bar can have special nights. Monday is salsa night; Tuesday is hip-hop night, and so on. But what if on a salsa night the DJ started playing hip-hop? It would be an ambience failure and guests would BOO the DJ. This booing would not happen in a more refined piano-playing location. The confused guests would say nothing to the management and find other places with a more consistent ambience.

The **young managements and staff** who run most of these places do not know any better or are not educated enough or **do not understand much about ambience and how it can affect the room and the guests.**

They might have gone to an electronic piano bar and had a lot of fun and the pianist was really entertaining. Then they come back to their lobby bar and want the same ambience in their place of work, not thinking of the guests, only of what they want to hear.

They tell the pianist about the place they visited and how it would be so nice to have that kind of music in their place of work. But they do not understand that the room they work in needs a completely different ambience where a certain class and type of people frequent. It is here that managements and agents should be the final judges and enforcers of the ambience; that is, assuming that they actually know anything about ambience.

**In days gone by, managers — who are unfortunately now all retired or close to retirement — had a good feeling about ambience and knew what it could do for a room.**

**Dancing in a lobby.** Some modern managements like to have dancing in the lobby but do not realise that it is very out-of-place and dancers would not want to dance while others are sitting talking and reading and the lights are bright. One never finds hotel lobby lighting in a disco. The ambience must be right and suitable to promote dancing.

At one hotel they have folklore music in the lobby every Wednesday (consistency). A few locals danced to the music and slowly it developed into folklore music and dancing. But it works because it developed naturally out of the folklore evening and management is consistent with everything. The good results show in the final figures at the end of the year at this particular hotel.

Yet another example occurs every Christmas season. **Guests love to be put in a festive mood and be reminded of Christmas with songs.** Most places I have worked at the management and staff detest these songs and sometimes forbid me to play them.

Modern managements are so weak they let the young staff control the ambience of the rooms and the manager of the restaurant, lobby or bar might also be young and therefore the ambience would be changed to **what they want** and not what the guests are accustomed to in the room.

**The managements and staff today do not seem to realise that it is the guest that pays their salaries** and it is important that they keep the ambience that the room is meant to provide for the guest and not the ambience they egotistically want for themselves.

**In some places I have played the management has tried to please a restaurant and the bar** and has placed the piano in the area between both. The restaurant guests want soft background music and the bar guests want to party. Eventually both sides are unhappy and the pianist is also extremely unhappy, as they cannot possibly meet the two different requirements.

**As most of the best hotel management schools are located in Switzerland, Swiss hotels should set a very good example of ambience:** however, I have the feeling that the schools teach everything one should know about hospitality and have forgotten about ambience and the result is that today's manager does not understand how important it is.

Even though musicians may change every month in a piano bar, the ambience and the style have to be kept the same. It is up to the managements and agents to provide the right pianist for the ambience. Each pianist is different, but even a pianist with a different style of playing can keep the ambience of the room the same.

An agent who is an ex-pianist himself once asked me to work a certain room as I would be perfect for the ambience. However after a meeting with the management, he called me back and said the management would like to find a new ambience after a renovation and I would no longer be suitable for the ambience. Now that is what I would call good management and a good agent.

**It is also up to the pianist to realise what the ambience of room is.** They might have played a rock 'n' roll piano bar the previous month and then are booked to play in a lobby or piano lounge the next month. The pianist must be able to adapt to the situation and play a different repertoire or change the way a song is played. And that is only possible if the pianist is well trained, educated in ambience and has many years of experience. There are hundreds of ways to play any song, and a good musician will read the room and know in what style to play the song.

The blame for this mixing-up of electronics and acoustic falls mostly on inexperienced managements, agents and staff: however, sometimes the pianists themselves are also guilty. The general public know and can feel the ambience and are confused by changes. In the end the guests assume that a particular song can be played in any room and ask for the song to be played. For example, a guest goes to a rock 'n' roll bar and asks for the classical piece 'Für Elise'.

**In the last few years I have noticed a push to try and change the ambience in rooms that have pianos.** Changing an ambience is possible with a major physical renovation of the room to suit the new ambience. I have seen and heard of managers wanting to try different things using short-term thinking and ending in long-term loss.

- Pianist from Monday to Thursday and an electronic duo or trio for the weekends.
- Changing piano rooms into electronic rooms.
- Try to attract a younger clientele with electronic music.
- Young pianists and young music.
- Young attractive female pianists.

Doing all or some of these things will not allow the customer to choose where to go for an ambience that suits their mood of the day. If ONLY ONE company made cars and only one model, there would be no choice for the customer. If all piano bars had loud electronic music there would be no choice for the customer.

**The secret about having different rooms with different ambiances is that customers have a choice of where to go.** Which locale a person goes to depends on their mood and how they feel on that particular day. Some days the feeling would be to go to a nice romantic piano bar and another day to an electronic bar to cut loose and party.

**If all rooms were to have musicians using midi files and playback music the guests would have no place to go to spend a romantic evening.**

**The reason that rooms have a decline in customers is that they do not provide a consistent ambience** and that is due to the lack of knowledge about ambience by the management, staff and agents. Staffs today want what they want and not what the guest wants: and they call that hospitality!!

Managements and staff have to realise that in a few years they will also be close to retiring and will not be able to find piano rooms having a nice ambience to go to because they have spent their entire career helping to ensure their demise.

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## **COMMUNICATION**

**A pianist in a piano bar, lobby bar, lounge or restaurant must be able to communicate with the guests.**

The pianist should be similar to the person serving at the bar who listens to, and can communicate with, the guests. (That's how I learned of many of the guest complaints.) The guests want to know the pianist and as the conversation progresses the pianist gets an idea of the sort of songs to play for the guest: without this communication the pianist will never know what the guests would like to hear.

Some hotels absolutely detest this pianist/guest communication. I guess they are either guilty of not running a smooth operation or afraid that the pianist they have hired is not capable of intelligent conversation. If the latter is the case then they should make sure they hire the right musician who can communicate well and also promote the establishment.

A pianist with good communication skills can increase sales for the establishment and also help guests communicate with each other.

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## RIGHT PLACE, WRONG MUSICIAN??

Quite often the musician has the wrong repertoire or personality for a particular hotel or restaurant. Even so, we often find that **the musician is continuously re-booked there solely because they play the type of music that the management and staff like to hear** and not what the guests want.

**Is the musician there to please management and the staff?**

OR

**Are they there to please the guests?**

**EXAMPLE 1.** A hotel that generally has guests of an older age-group would **not** want a musician playing loud pop music: they would much prefer music that they could relate to.

**EXAMPLE 2.** An electronic piano bar player who generally likes to perform loudly is found playing in a restaurant or lobby where it disturbs the people who are there for good food, conversation and pleasant piano music that creates a nice ambience.

It is also up to the musician to know and adapt to the situation. If a pianist is normally a rock 'n' roll piano bar player, they should be able to adapt when playing in a restaurant and be able to change the repertoire to suit the place he is playing in.

Likewise it is also up to the agents to send the right pianist to the room and managements should also beware of agents sending just anyone as there was no-one else available. There have been times when I have played in restaurants and hotel lobbies where the music had to be quiet. **Some of the managements and staff wanted me to play music that they liked,** which was loud rock 'n' roll music. This type of music played in a lounge or lobby would quickly make the clientele want to leave. In these situations I despaired at the stupidity of these staff-members, as **I was there to please the guests, who in the end paid our wages, and not to please the staff.**

There is another problem: **I have seen managements look only at the artist's picture and often by this alone decide if the artist is suitable for the room.** That is definitely a brainless way of making a decision on the suitability of a musician. (SEE TOPIC ON AGENTS))

### **SOLUTION:**

**The hotel-guest questionnaire** should include at least 3 – 4 questions about the music and the musician and the ambience they create. At one restaurant the questionnaire also requests that the guests fill out their contact info and put it in a box at the entrance. Every month they had a draw, the prize being a dinner for two. In this fashion the guests were encouraged to fill out the questionnaire. This meant that the restaurant also accumulated many email addresses in their data-base, and so could send out information to hundreds of guests about upcoming events.

**Advertising.** Most hotels today have a website and can advertise their services at minimum cost. However, when I look at websites of hotels that have live music there is no schedule that includes the names of the musicians. Doing this would encourage guests to catch their favourite musician.

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## **DIGITAL OR ACOUSTIC PIANO?**

**Nothing can replace the acoustic sound of a good grand piano in any room.** But maintenance of an acoustic piano can be costly and a digital piano can be a more-than-adequate replacement.

**The grand piano in a hotel or restaurant is subject to tremendous temperature and humidity** changes due to doors opening and closing as people come and go. An acoustic grand piano that is played 4 – 6 hrs every day needs to be properly maintained and tuned at least once a month: this can be a major expense in addition to the cost of the musician. **Just like a car needs regular servicing, so does an acoustic piano and if a minor job is left unfixed it might be irreparable.**

**There have been numerous occasions** in my experience where a piano has not been tuned for months, but the musician is forced to play it regardless. Managements do not realise that the people who *really* suffer are the guests (and the pianist). Many guests ask the pianist why the piano is not tuned. It is very often not until the guest complains to the management that anything gets done about it.

**The new digital grand pianos** look and sound like a normal acoustic grand piano but it does not have strings, so tuning is never required. From a distance the quality of the sound is practically indistinguishable from a real acoustic piano. Many players of these pianos including myself find the sound while sitting at the piano not quite right in a bigger room. With some modifications, these pianos would sound great for the performer and be a good replacement for the acoustic piano in many hotels.

The pianos that these companies now have on sale are built for the home market and sound good in small rooms. But for a large hotel lobby or a big bar they could have a special model having unobtrusive satellite speakers around the big room that would evenly distribute the sound and also send a good sound back to the performer. Once seen and heard in hotels the sales would probably also improve in the private home market sector.

**The three main companies now specialising in these pianos are Roland, Yamaha and Kawai.** These three companies have not yet realised the sales potential they have if every hotel were to replace their acoustic piano with a digital grand.

**The companies should concentrate more on the acoustic piano sound instead of the entire midi and play-back technology** that enables the piano to sound like a fairground organ and is more suited to the home leisure pianist. The companies should make a digital piano having only piano sounds and make the sound really good. By installing a better speaker system inside that is capable of reproducing all the frequencies of a piano properly, together with an adequate monitor speaker for the pianist would be a step in the right direction. A 3-way switch so that the internal piano speakers, external speakers and headphones can work at the same time or individually would give the performer the ability to choose the way they listen to the sound.

ALAN: CHANGED A BIT HERE

In many piano music rooms there are tables very close to the instrument. This means that the pianist has to play very quietly, and the guests further off do not hear any music, or maybe just a faint sound.

**Manufacturers should design the digital grand piano with a compact external satellite speaker system** to be used, where necessary, in conjunction with the internal speakers. Just like an acoustic sound comes from the piano, the main sound from the digital piano should come from the internal speakers as it is where the musician is playing. The compact speakers placed in strategic locations around the room (producing the music at a lower volume) would ensure a good even sound. The digital grand piano could also have a built in mixer and inputs for the musicians to plug in their own devices such as microphones and laptops and effect units. This would be extremely helpful and the musician would not need to carry a sound system.

**Managements must take care, however, that the piano does not have any playback features, as their indiscriminate use (such as would be almost bound to happen when lazy, inexperienced or non-pianists were playing it) would turn a previously pleasant ambience into that of a cheap dance hall.**

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## TUNING OF PIANO

A piano must be regularly tuned and maintained.

I would love to see a manager sitting at their computer with the 'A' and 'E' on their keyboard not working. And every time they needed those two letters they had to use alt + shift to get those letters.

**It would be really frustrating to type business letters, etc. That is exactly what a pianist has to endure when notes are not working or are out of tune.**

Guests who patronise rooms where a piano is played are spending money and they have the right to expect that they can listen to a piano that is in tune and with all the notes working.

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## **COMPLAIN AND COMPLIMENT**

**When a piano is out of tune, guests rarely complain.** The guest might complain to the pianist, but never to the management. It would be of enormous benefit if guests were to speak to the management as they hardly ever listen when musicians try to suggest improvements that could be made.

**The only way to have good entertainment and keep the ambience of a room the way it is, is for guests to speak up.**

I have observed guest-management conversations. Usually the guest starts to say something and then backs down as the manager states their point of view.

Unfortunately, the manager has not taken the time to really hear the guest out completely, but has jumped in and produced the hotel's view. So the guest backs down and says nothing more.

**Letters to the management are usually a good way to get a point across.**

It is important that guests let the managements know **when a musician is good, suits the room and the ambience is perfect.**

**Before giving an opinion, one must take into consideration**

- The ambience the room is for
- The type of clientele that frequents the room
- And then judge if the music and style of the pianist fits the ambience.

Maybe the musician is not playing the type of music that the management and staff like to hear but is playing what guests like. This pianist will never be asked to return unless you as a guest tell the management the pleasure you had hearing such a good pianist.

**SO PLEASE DISCLOSE YOUR SATISFACTION OR DISSATISFACTION TO MANAGERMENTS.**

I have spoken to kitchen chefs, and they also tell me that guests never complain to the service personnel. For example, if a customer had complained that the spaghetti was too salty, the kitchen would cook a new pot-full and the other guests who ordered the same dish would be able to enjoy it. In future the kitchen would be more cautious.

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## DRINKS AND TIPS

### **It happens all the time: ‘Send the piano-player a drink’.**

But today, many pianists do not want a drink while they play and are also health conscious. Many prefer to say, ‘No thank you’, which sometimes is taken as an insult by the guest. But guests do not understand this, as it has been a custom for many years.

It would be better for the guest to give the pianist a tip so they have a choice of whether they have a drink or something else. In the US it is customary for a tip jar to be put on the piano, but in Europe managements look down their nose at such an idea, as they prefer to make the commission on the sale of a drink for the pianist.

In numerous hotels, **the staff all but forces the pianist to take a drink** even if they end up throwing it away, because the salary of the staff is often based on commission on sales and it also helps them meet their monthly budget-target.

Maybe managements feel that having a tip jar on the piano is implying to the clientele that they do not pay the entertainer enough.

**STORY.** I once worked a very high-class hotel and the barman gave me a single malt whisky because a customer had offered me a drink. A month later I got a letter from the booking agency stating that the hotel would not hire me again because I took a drink that cost 65sFr. It was not my fault, but the bar staff were greedy and that cost me my job, lost a customer and of course the blame fell on me.

I also worked on a cruise ship which had a regulation which disallowed tips. Passengers had to leave the tips in envelopes when they left the ship at the reception and the staff would get it later. Many guests told me that they left a tip for me and of course when I finally left the ship there were no tips for me. If you travel on a ship or in hotels please leave all tips directly to the person you want to give them to. Some hotels collect all the tips from the waiters and then divide it at the end of the month and your favourite staff may not get the right amount. So when you visit a piano bar, **DO NOT SEND THE PIANIST A DRINK, GIVE THEM A TIP INSTEAD.**

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## STAFF AND MUSICIAN

**Nowadays, there is little respect for the musician from management and staff.**

There are many incidents (one of which is listed below) where managements and staff are able to do as they wish regarding the musician.

**STORY.** I worked in a very famous 5-star hotel many years ago. It was in the summer months and the hotel had tourist groups of different nationalities staying at the hotel every day. After a few days I saw that one particular group went for dinner each day at 6.30 p.m. I knew a couple of songs from their country and it took a few days for me to learn phonetically to sing these songs. I began to play and sing these songs when I saw the group go for dinner and a few of them came back after dinner and ordering an average minimum of 500 sFr in drinks every evening. This went on for 1 – 2 weeks. The particular nationality is very polite, but the staff did not want them in the bar. They told me not to play the songs anymore. One can now calculate 500 sFr a day for 60 days is what the hotel lost in revenue. I could have gone to the manager, but then I would have to put up with staff being angry with me. I was caught in the middle. This is an example of what I mean when I say that staff and managements want what they want and are not there to provide a service for the guest.

At times hotels just push the pianist in corners, hallways and in front of toilets to play rather than in a proper location. This also makes the guests **wonder about the intelligence of the management.**

The staff does not like to hear the same songs over and over again, but what if the guests like them?

Unfortunately, the current trend is to change pianists every month. This is mainly due to the agents that have elbowed their way into booking hotel pianists, and who by this ruse (changing pianists monthly) make it difficult for hotels to book pianists directly themselves, as they did before, when they would book a pianist for a season or even hire them permanently. These agents are also helped by the bar staff who bitch about having to listen sometimes to the same songs and jokes, day in, day out. **Even very famous artists stick to their favourite songs and hits or jokes and they repeat them over and over** as that is why people come back to see them. Management and staff should stick to their jobs and let the entertainer do their job.

A pianist working the same venue for years would remember the names of guests and their favourite songs just like a bar-person would remember their favourite drink. This is what hospitality is all about and returning guests would love to see a familiar face who remembers them and what they like.

**I would like to remind management and staff that any reasonably intelligent pianist could do their jobs in a matter of weeks (and often, due to force of circumstance, have done just that), but that it would take them many years to learn to play an instrument and perform in public.**

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## THE LIFE OF A PIANIST

A pianist working in hotels, bars and restaurants today is treated this way:

**Accept the salary you are offered or you will not be given any more work.**

**Accept the hours scheduled or you will not get to work there again.**

**Do not complain: just sit there and play and do what we tell you.**

**Take a break now, and stay here; we may need you to play soon.**

**Finish your dinner later, we need you to play now.**

**Eat what we give you and accept your living conditions.**

**We need your best performance every day**

There is a saying among musicians: 'Animals are treated better and prostitutes earn more'.

**TRAVEL.** A pianist usually travels a lot and every month is a new job in the same or a different country. A few years ago prior to 9/11 when I was flying a lot between countries the luggage rules were very relaxed and my luggage was almost always over the weight allowed. But post-9/11 regulations are so strict that pianists can carry very little or have to pay for the extra weight.

### **What does a pianist carry?**

All the normal things one has to carry when one goes on a trip, and women have to carry a lot more. In addition to that the pianist may carry music books, which are heavy; a laptop; a reverberation unit or a small sound system and maybe a small portable keyboard to try out new songs.

On top of these, they have to have all the cables and power supplies that **hotels have not installed** because nobody has the wit to realise they are necessary.

In addition to all this, **the pianist may have to carry an iron to press their clothes.** Years ago, hotels allowed the pianists to have their work clothes cleaned and pressed. Not any more: now in many places it means washing your clothes in the bath (if there is one) and hanging them up to dry. Then hotels expect the pianist to look smart and smell good.

In addition to all the above travel supplies, the pianist may have to carry a portable cooker to make tea or coffee or maybe a ready-made pasta for after work as it was an 8 hour job, with dinner at 6 pm and **no sandwich was available after work at 2 am.**

Some pianists might go to a fitness studio, jogging, and swimming and have to carry all the necessary clothing, shoes, etc. needed for these activities.

To end it all, everything together must weigh less than the 20 kg limit allowed by airlines. The hotels used to pay travel costs and the agents would share the travel costs between the 3 – 4 hotels that engaged the musician. **Now they do not pay the airline or train tickets** and one can forget about asking for excess baggage money. They nevertheless still expect the best from you, despite the steady eating away of one's working conditions.

## ACCOMMODATION

**Today there are only a handful of hotels that treat the pianist with respect and consideration.** The musician does not need a suite: merely a good, clean room in the hotel so that he can go there during a break to relax, recharge or to pick up the music for a song a guest just requested.

If the pianist has an apartment or room outside the hotel there must be some place in the hotel where the pianist can keep winter shoes, work shoes, suits and other work-related items.

I have stayed in some rooms provided for the pianist, sometimes in very **high-class hotels, where the curtains were falling apart and probably had not been cleaned in the previous 20 years, the carpets were soiled and smelled, the bed was broken** — the list can go on.

**FOOD** is very important. Most hotel staff can go home every day or at least at the weekends and enjoy a good meal. The poor musician is stuck in the hotel and has to rely on the food he will get from the hotel. **Some hotels that really care allow the pianist access to the restaurants to eat** within a certain price limit, which is usually reasonable.

But most hotels require the pianist to eat the staff meals, which in most hotels are not exactly healthy or good. Going half-hungry or with an upset stomach to work and then having to make the hotel guests happy is not easy.

Often a guest will ask how the food is in the hotel restaurant, or in a another hotel, and a pianist cannot give an answer as they do not eat in the restaurant.

**Directors should consider a pianist as a good-will ambassador for the hotel** as the pianist will definitely say good things about a hotel if he is fed decently and not treated like an *Untermensch*. Musicians who read this — from now on tell the truth and do not lie about the food.

I know most musicians are often very hungry when they finish a job. It might be difficult to believe, but even though playing an instrument is not as physically demanding as playing a 90 min football game, it nevertheless takes a lot of energy and nerves. Hotels **never** offer the pianist the possibility of having a sandwich after work.

Other points:

A lot of times there are special events happening in a hotel or bar and the **musician might have an evening off**. Usually the hotel would know about these months in advance and even when they sign the contract with the musician. But it is rarely mentioned in the contract and it is very

often the case that management tells the musician at the last minute that they have a day off and of course it is not paid.

**Days off for musicians are precious.** Musicians are usually alone and might use a day off **to visit a friend in another city or go home to their family.** But if a musician is told at the last minute, there is no chance to make arrangements for visits. This is a complete lack of consideration and very bad management practice.

Sometimes the hotel knows in advance of a special party that might want the musician to stay later, but do not inform the musician ahead of time. They wait until the last moment and then tell the musician, who may already have arranged a trip home to be with their family, and now has to work overtime and miss the train.

Many years ago I worked at some hotels that gave me an envelope on my arrival informing me of all special events and days off and what was required of me for the duration of the contract. This practice seems to be obsolete today.

## **MUSICIANS ARE ALSO HUMAN AND NEED TO BE TREATED LIKE HUMANS**

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## **THE PIANIST'S WORK**

**The non-musician has the impression that a musician arrives well dressed, plays a few songs, has a few drinks, chats with people and goes home and sleeps all day.**

**In contrast to other jobs, a musician must perform flawlessly at all times.** A person in accounting can make an error and go back and correct it. A secretary can go back and correct a typing error. And the list of other jobs where corrections can be made goes on... But the musician is expected to be perfect at all times and this is a very demanding skill. A musician on the job has spent many hours at home perfecting what they have to play on the job. Some musicians began studying music when they were children and in their late teens decided that music was going to be their life. After 10 or more years of studying piano they go to music school and practice 8 – 10 hours a day. Some study singing also, and then 4 – 10 years later when they feel they are ready, they begin playing in hotels or bars.

Compared to a doctors, lawyers and other well-paid professions where they can all make mistakes, **musicians are not allowed mistakes and are paid much less.** Should this not be a better-paid job than a waiter, secretary, factory worker or road-sweeper? A piano teacher, massage therapist and plumber are allowed breaks, get paid for overtime and allowed to make mistakes, and all earn more than a musician who is not allowed to make mistakes.

Non-musicians do not realise the work that goes on behind the stage and at home. At work a musician's job looks so easy to the non-professional.

But they must:

Do hours of technical practice and learning new songs at home or in hotel rooms

Arrange new songs and rework old arrangements

Keep listening to music

Work when sick

Accept not getting days off to celebrate a family birthdays etc.

Work most important holidays

Smile and perform after a death in the family

Go to work with a smile after travelling all the previous night and day and not having slept the night before.

**Once on the job the musician still has to study and learn.** For example, a guest comes in and asks for an obscure song that was played at their wedding. As it is such an odd song most pianists would not know it. But the pianist goes back to his room after work, looks it up in his music books or finds it on the internet and downloads it and then has to spend more time learning it, arranging it and memorising it. Sometimes all this could take 30 min and at other

times 2 – 3 hours. Then the musician comes back and plays it for the guest the next evening. I do not see too many other jobs that have these sorts of demands.

I have spoken to musicians who have been playing around the world since the early 1970s. Most of them have told me that **over the last 30 years the hours of work have increased, but the wages have remained the same.**

Musicians over these years have suffered because there are always some who will work the underpaid jobs.

Agents and employers are well aware of this and have exploited the situation so that **musicians nowadays are paid a lower salary than unskilled labour.**

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## **WHAT A PIANIST MUST KNOW**

Many a time I have been to a lounge, lobby or restaurant and observed that **the pianist is trying to make a concert out of the job.** Creating a concert in these situations just does not work. Concerts are held in a concert hall.

In a lobby, lounge or restaurant a pianist must know that they are there to provide a background and ambience for the guests. Every time you go to a place to play you must imagine yourself sitting out there and talking with friends or reading and think of what you would like to hear as a guest. Then choose the songs and the way you would play them.

**There are many ways to play a song. A song that is playable in different styles usually becomes a standard song.** Sometimes the ambience requires you to play the song with a little more energy than in the originally recorded style. At other times it might need to be played as a ballad: the ambience will tell you that.

Most pianists who are not experienced have a set way to play a song. But as rooms fill up or thin out the way to play that song will also have to change in order to keep the ambience of the particular moment. Remember, you are not working in a lounge, restaurant, or lobby to do a concert. Maybe in a high-energy electronic bar it is possible to simulate a concert.

A lounge, lobby and restaurant musician must know that the ambience in a room changes continuously as people come and go.

Sometimes guests have heard you play a lovely ballad in another bar. They happen to visit you in a loud piano bar at 1 a.m. and it has a party atmosphere. You might try playing the ballad in a funky style or know a different way to play the song, as the ballad would not be suitable at that moment.

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## WORKING HOURS

When someone sees a pianist play, they think how easy it seems. **However, it takes a lot of work to perfect and memorise all the songs so that they can play them fluently.** People maybe also think that the musician has an easy life, only working for 4 – 5 hours. But nobody sees **the time spent at home or in the hotel room learning** new songs and practicing their technique. Without good technique a pianist cannot play in a piano bar.

Except perhaps in the field of sports, it is not necessary for people to do this daily training, and for a musician to practice 2 – 4 hrs and then go to work 6 – 8 hrs is much too demanding. More than 4 hrs playing time is slave-driving, but commonly takes place.

When a guest **sees a pianist who has been working more than 4 hours they see a bored and tired pianist.** Do you think the guest will want to come back earlier the next day to see the pianist again? By working a pianist past 4 hours managements are looking for quantity, not quality, and by doing this they are making guests move to other locations.

When you buy a new CD you tend to play it very often. But after a while you get fed up with it and put something else on for a change. This is exactly what happens when managements want a pianist to play past 4 – 5 hrs — the public gets fed up and wanders off.

Many years ago I was employed at a hotel where I worked a total of five hours an evening. After a few return dates, I arrived for yet another month and was told that the hours had been increased to 6 hrs (Mon – Thu) and 7 hrs (Fri and Sat) playing time even though the contract stated 5 hrs and the wages remained the same. The director's secretary told me **that it was considered that we worked too few hours compared to other hotel employees** and that pianists had to work about the same hours as all other employees. As all the other pianists had played the extra hours, I was obliged to comply or leave. I wonder how many other people can do a six-hour job without proper breaks and be 100% perfect all the time?

On many occasions when I have visited piano bars late at night, I have heard friends and people say the pianist looks so bored. I have quickly jumped in and reminded people that **the poor pianist has probably been on the job for 6 hrs and is exhausted trying to play without mistakes and is tired mentally and physically.**

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## **BREAKS**

I read a story of a very famous jazz pianist who after 10 min into a concert apologised for his inability to perform well enough that evening: he then left the stage and came back 15 min later to give one of his best-ever concerts.

Whenever an artist is getting ready to perform they have to get into a frame of mind that is hard to describe and remain there during the performance. Concert performers do not perform more than 2 or maximum 4 concerts a week and each concert does not last more than 2hrs. They would normally have an intermission between the performing times to give them a chance to recharge and get back into the necessary frame of mind and **for the audience also to have a break.**

If you just read the last sentence, please read it again.

**GIVING THE AUDIENCE A BREAK** is exactly what is needed and even more important when a musician works 4 – 8 hrs a day and 6 – 7 days a week. The musician also needs to get into the right frame of mind for the next performance.

**While performing a bar pianist has to do and think of several things at the same time:**

- Be able to perform and hold a conversation
- Remember a guest request
- Decide what song would fit after the requested song
- Greet guests and remember their names and requests
- All this requires a lot of mental energy and everything takes place while playing the song. This is why a pianist does need to get away from the instrument every hour.

I wonder if it would be possible for any non-musicians to NOT be allowed to move from their work station, talk or make **any** mistakes. The pressure would be so intense that it would be impossible. **I challenge any typist to sit and type for 6 – 8 hrs without proper breaks and not make a single mistake.**

Many hotels expect musicians to work 2 – 3 hours without getting up from the piano. Internationally-agreed rules allow all workers, and that includes musicians, a standard 10 – 15 min break every hour. Some hoteliers do not like to see the pianist leave the piano to go to the toilet and they glare at us as if to say, ‘You shouldn’t be leaving the piano’.

**Having a musician play without a break is like listening to a CD over and over again hour after hour. Eventually one never wants to listen to it again and that is why guests are slowly finding other and better places to spend their money.**

Allowing the musician a break gives them a chance to relax a bit and also **gives guests a period of contrast** so that they are able to look forward to the pleasant music when the pianist returns.

In most countries the musicians have a standard 4 – 5 hrs with a 15 min break every hour. On some jobs a dinner break of 1 hr is allowed. There are a few countries, e.g. Switzerland, where musicians can be made to work 7 – 8 hrs a day and breaks are (illegally) not allowed. The musician is expected to play like a machine and because they are not machines, get tired and cannot perform the required job to perfection.

A playing-time of 4 – 5 hrs daily with breaks allows the pianist to remain fresh and motivated and to give of his best every day, and not to become bored to distraction by having to try and concentrate without pause for 6 or 7 hours at a stretch. Over such a long period, the musician **has to space out their energy and concentration and can only give 30 – 40% of their capacity.** Who wants to listen to an over-worked and bored-stiff piano player working at 30% power? Not even the management and staff, and certainly not the hotel/bar patrons. Hotels and restaurants think that they gain more with increased hours, but in the **long term they will end up with less clientele as they value quantity over quality.**

After reading this many people who patronise hotels and bars will now perhaps be a bit more sympathetic, as they will know why the pianist may look so bored and tired.

Rooms that need piano **music for 6 – 8 hrs a day should consider having a local house pianist for the cocktail hours and the main pianist for later** or vice-versa. A local pianist who stays at the same hotel for an extended period will in due course attract a big following and it would generate good business for the room.

Some establishments give a pianist a 2 – 3 hr break in-between the work hours. This enables the establishment to have piano music over a considerable amount of time. However, managements have never looked at the pianist's point of view. There is nothing the pianist can do except wait for the alarm telling them it's time to go back to work, and most of us know that waiting makes one even more tired. A pianist will go back and play and suffer through the job, and so the guests will suffer, too, because the pianist is tired.

Short breaks of 10 – 14 min keeps the momentum of the music for the pianist and a long break will destroy the momentum and the guests who are paying customers, without realising why, will not enjoy the performance as much.

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## ALL ABOUT SALARIES

In the early 1980s a coffee would cost sFr 2.50 in a good location in Switzerland, but today one can pay up to sFr 5 for a coffee. The prices have gone up, but the salary of the musician has gone down.

Let me explain how the wages have gone down and not up.

The musician's contract in the 1980s included vacation pay. By the middle 1990s the vacation pay was included in the daily wage, which remained the same.

Accommodation and food were fully included but the new contracts added a price for room and food to the gross income and deducted the same amount after the taxation and also the agent's commission were calculated. This gave the agents more money and also the tax man. In the end the musician is actually making far less than they earned in the 1980s and the hours have been increased.

It would be fair to say that hourly rates should have just about doubled in the same way the price of a cup of coffee has, and perhaps even more for a musician having much experience. Playing times should be between 4 and 5 hrs and include a 15 min break every hour.

When one visits a massage therapist or goes for a music lesson, it is always nominally **stated to be for one hour, but in reality the lesson or massage lasts 45 – 50 min**, which gives the teacher or therapist a few minutes to relax before the next session. (While a therapist or professional private piano teacher makes about sFr 100 per hour, a musician earns less than half that).

**The same wages are paid to a pianist who has little experience** and to a pianist who relies on machines to do the job, and also to the pianist who has been playing for many years and has the consequent extensive experience. It could be compared to someone who asks the **auto salesman to sell him a BMW for the same price as a Lada**. The most frequent response is that the expensive musician is too highly-priced for the budget. I am not a specialist in economy, but if the experienced player earns more and the beginner less, the budget would automatically balance.

**Overtime playing.** Quite often there will be a party or some guests that would like the pianist to play longer. **Managements then demand that the piano player plays longer but do not think of asking if the pianist would like a sandwich** or the taxi fare home because the extra playing-time means that they miss their last train/tram/"bus home — or even offer extra overtime payment. It is expected that the extra work and costs of the pianist is carried by the pianist themselves, otherwise they do not get a return contract. Playing 2 – 3 songs as an encore after finishing time is normal but anything more should be considered overtime.

Musicians are expected to work 6 days and sometimes 7 days a week. All musicians strongly believe that **the 7<sup>th</sup> day should be paid at double the usual rate, just as it is in other jobs**. All holidays like Christmas, Easter, and New Year's Eve should be a minimum of double wages. But this rarely, if ever, happens for musicians.

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## **AGENTS**

Trying to keep managements, pianists and customers happy is not an easy task as an agent has to deal with all kinds of people, personalities and situations. However, somehow they manage to co-ordinate and keep musicians working, managements happy, and guests satisfied.

Agency commissions are now paid by the musician and that can range from 5% to 30% of the gross income depending on the agent and country. Musicians **think that the commission should be split 50-50 by the hotel and musician.**

Until the mid 1990s (in Switzerland) vacation pay was always paid, but the **agents took that out and included it in the gross income.** The room and board were also free, but now most hotels charge for it. This means that over the last 2 or 3 decades the income of a musician has actually considerably decreased in real terms rather than increasing.

As some hotel staff said:

**'We prefer good musicians who slavishly accept and obey every command and are willing to do whatever we tell them'.**

In the 1970s and 80s the agents were extremely good. They knew which musicians fitted a room and were very reasonable with the wages and commissions for the musicians.

Then came the agents knowing absolutely nothing about music and for whom everything is just business. This is when things started to change. These new agents have never played an instrument, never known what it is like to play and live in different hotels. Therefore they make new agreements and with smooth talk they can convince gullible managements that they are getting a good service.

But the pendulum occasionally swings back; slowly, as some experienced musicians are getting into the agency business, things may get better for the musician.

Many agents just sit in an office and send musicians around the world. But they have never met or heard the musician perform live. I have worked cities that are very close to some of the agents, but they have not taken the time to find out what they are selling to hotels and bars. They rely on performance reports from the managers.

But some agents are always on the move to find new and better musicians and to keep in contact with managers and at the same time listen to the musicians. When managers see this agent often, they know that he is responsible and wants the best for the establishment. On the other hand, it still does not necessarily mean the agent actually knows anything about music: they may be trying to appear busy and on-the-job in an effort to cover up their ignorance.

When agents send propositions of pianists out to hotels they make copies of **a CD of the artist and send it out with their pictures.** The problem with a CD is that one does not know if the musician is really the one who played and sang on the CD.

For example, I could get a studio pianist and a singer, take them to a studio and record a few songs, then send it out claiming it is me who is the fantastic pianist/singer.

**A better way to decide would be to have a live video but it is seldom used.**

I have personally **seen managements just look at the pictures of various artists and make their decision on who will fit the room just by the photo.** Very poor thinking as they really do not know what they are getting.

I have also observed many places asking for attractive women whether they can play adequately or not in order to try and pull in male clientele, but do not realise that by doing so female guests will soon not patronise the place any more, and the establishment will ultimately get a bad reputation.

**Work permits.** Unfortunately, work permits for musicians are given out freely in most countries without questions being asked if there are any local players who might fit the jobs. This is because the musicians from other countries are willing to accept a low salary.

But in order to find out who the local players are and what styles they play there ought to be an organisation that handles the work permits for musicians and makes sure that locals are the first in line to work. This organisation should be independent from the agent's organisation.

As musician's unions are notoriously weak, and there is no-where to go when a musician is taken advantage of, there should be an international law and guidelines for musicians that work in bars, hotels and restaurants.

As musicians travel between many countries, there should also be a regulation which allows local musicians to get the first option for jobs, and a work-permit can be given to employ someone from another country if a suitable local pianist cannot be found (which doesn't mean when a local pianist cannot be found to work for a derisory salary, and thus the job goes by default to a pianist from Kazakhstan – or Bulgaria, etc., etc.).

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## **FLOWERS ON A PIANO**

**Guest comments:** A wonderful arrangement of flowers from the florist, but it obstructs our view of the pianist; what a pity. One does not go to a concert where the performer cannot be seen because of a flower arrangement. This reflects very poorly on the management and shows a lack of culture and very poor taste.

**Pianist comments:** Nice flowers, but I wish I could see the guests so I can choose my repertoire to suit their taste, style and age group. Maybe the flowers are more important than the music I play.

**Management view:** The piano top looks so bare and pianos usually have flowers on top.

**My View:** Flowers and foodstuff on the piano are seen by everyone and obstruct the view of the audience who would like to be able to see the performer. Even though I have told managements about this, nothing has changed. Guests still tell me how ridiculous it is to pay a pianist and then hide them behind a forest of flowers, menus, newspapers, glasses, etc. The guests do not complain but have expressed the opinion that the management lacks culture and education and disrespects both the instrument and the pianist.

The florist has chosen the best places for their flower arrangements to be seen and appreciated, but has not taken into account that the piano is being played daily. I wonder if a florist would appreciate a large truck parked in front and blocking any view of the shop. The management would not seem to care that the pianist has to peer through a forest of flowers to see the guests, and vice versa. I sometimes wonder, do florists put flowers in front of paintings at an exhibition?

I remember working in a few 5-star leading hotels where the florist decided to put flowers on the piano as they see people do in their homes where the piano is seldom played and is just another piece of furniture. When the director saw them, he asked for them to be removed, and one of them said it showed no respect to the pianist or the instrument.

Have you ever been to a meeting and there was a bouquet of flowers between you and the other person? Both of you would be playing hide and seek around the flowers. That is exactly what happens when there are flowers on a piano and a pianist is trying to entertain.

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## PIANO USED AS NEWS-STAND???

**Guest comments:** We put things on our piano at home because it is so seldom played. But it is a pity to see a piano used as a newsstand when someone is playing it. You would have thought the management would have the taste and courtesy to the pianist to buy a proper stand.

**Pianist comments:** After all the years of hard practicing, I feel like I am working in a newspaper stand. Do I need to give 100%??

**Management view:** We need a place to keep the magazines and the newspapers. Put them on the piano.

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## PIANO TOP USED AS BUFFET TABLE???

**Guest comments:** Management should have more respect for this wonderful and expensive instrument and also show respect to the musician. Could they not afford a table and cover it with a nice table cloth?

**Pianist comments:** I feel like a barkeeper. No wonder I have an out-of-tune piano, and when I open the lid I see all the stains of spilled drinks and some of the keys are stuck. I feel sorry for the guests who have to listen to an out-of-tune piano. If I complain, I will never be asked to work here again. I wish the guests would complain about the lack of respect for the piano.

**Management view:** We need one more table for the juices and wines at the buffet. Put them on the piano.

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The pianist should be provided with a small table beside him so that they have somewhere to put a drink. Being well aware of the great risk of expensive accidents that can happen, a pianist would never put a drink on the piano, so the only alternative is to put it on the floor, which is visually inelegant.

I have often **seen guests place their coats, briefcases, handbags etc. on a piano** while someone is playing the instrument. It shows that the person has no sensitivity and has **absolutely no respect for the pianist and the instrument.**

Also when placing anything on an expensive instrument such as a piano you might scratch the surface until eventually the instrument would be covered with scratches.

**You would not like your piano at home to have scratch marks, would you?**

Waiters and waitresses sometimes place their tray on the piano while serving. But they do not realise that the tray might have some grains of sugar or other foodstuff underneath that might scratch the surface.

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Hope you enjoyed reading this and you can send your suggestions or comments to me. [pianogig@gmail.com](mailto:pianogig@gmail.com)

Musicians — email me with your stories and I will include them in this pdf file.

## *KEEP LIVE MUSIC ALIVE*

*Flywin*

The rows of double-dashed lines that are between the sections are not all in the same place on the page. I suppose it's not all that important, but if you know a way to get them all the same without having to do each one by hand, as it were, I'd do it.