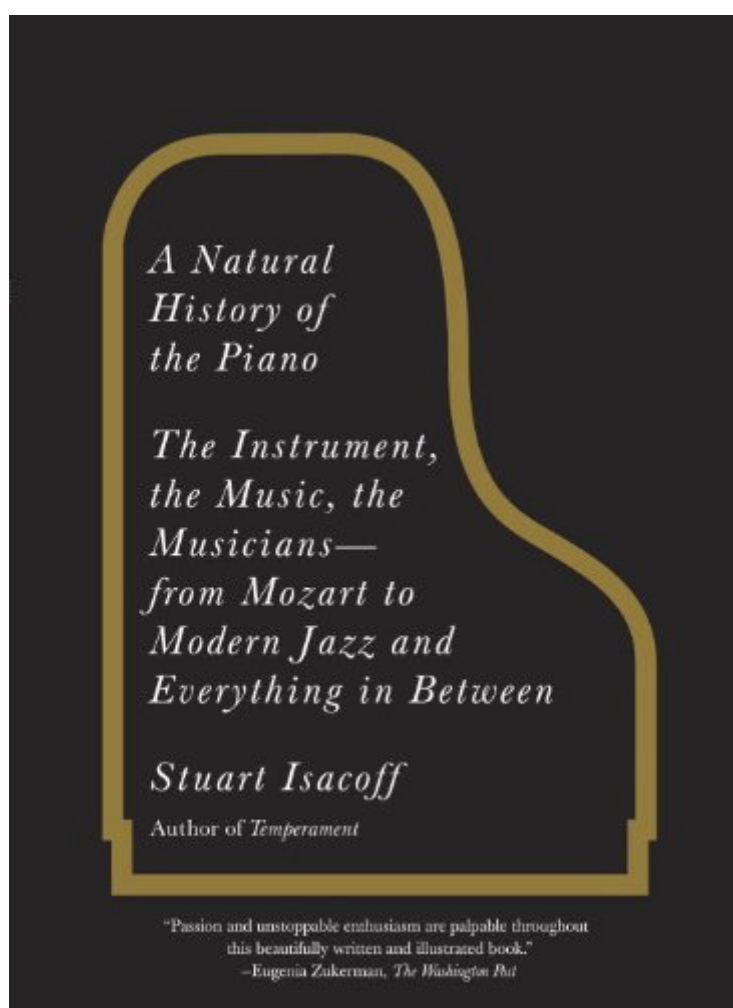


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# A Natural History Of The Piano: The Instrument, The Music, The Musicians--from Mozart To Modern Jazz And Everything In Between



## Synopsis

A beautifully illustrated, totally engrossing celebration of the piano, and the composers and performers who have made it their own. **•** With honed sensitivity and unquestioned expertise, Stuart Isacoff **•** pianist, critic, teacher, and author of *Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western Civilization* **•** unfolds the ongoing history and evolution of the piano and all its myriad wonders: how its very sound provides the basis for emotional expression and individual style, and why it has so powerfully entertained generation upon generation of listeners. He illuminates the groundbreaking music of Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, Schumann, and Debussy. He analyzes the breathtaking techniques of Glenn Gould, Oscar Peterson, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Arthur Rubinstein, and Van Cliburn, and he gives musicians including Alfred Brendel, Murray Perahia, Menahem Pressler, and Vladimir Horowitz the opportunity to discuss their approaches. Isacoff delineates how classical music and jazz influenced each other as the uniquely American art form progressed from ragtime, novelty, stride, boogie, bebop, and beyond, through Scott Joplin, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock, Cecil Taylor, and Bill Charlap. **•** *A Natural History of the Piano* distills a lifetime of research and passion into one brilliant narrative. We witness Mozart unveiling his monumental concertos in Vienna **•** in his coffeehouses, using a special piano with one keyboard for the hands and another for the feet; European virtuoso Henri Herz entertaining rowdy miners during the California gold rush; Beethoven at his piano, conjuring healing angels to console a grieving mother who had lost her child; Liszt fainting in the arms of a page turner to spark an entire hall into hysterics. Here is the instrument in all its complexity and beauty. We learn of the incredible craftsmanship of a modern Steinway, the peculiarity of specialty pianos built for the Victorian household, the continuing innovation in keyboards including electronic ones. And most of all, we hear the music of the masters, from centuries ago and in our own age, brilliantly evoked and as marvelous as its most recent performance. **•** **•** With this wide-ranging volume, Isacoff gives us a must-have for music lovers, pianists, and the armchair musician.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Although I am going to say a few negative things about this book, I want to be clear that the four star appraisal is not a mistake. For the most part, I really enjoyed this book. It is well written, pretty well researched, carefully organized and eminently readable. Stuart Isacoff is a talented writer and his tone is friendly and his pace is excellent. His selection of prints and photos breathes more vibrancy into the text, which is well edited and, for lack of a better word, "efficient". It was a real pleasure to read this book and when I was through, I felt I had learned a lot. Unfortunately, I think calling this book *A Natural History of the Piano* is just plain wrong. It's not that at all. After a few obligatory pages about the history of the instrument, Mr. Isacoff writes mainly about the people who played the piano, the music that was written for the piano, some great performances on the piano, and all sorts of tangents and incidental things musical related to the piano. There is, however, precious little about the piano itself. While I don't disagree with his approach, and I found his organization of the book exceptional and tight, adding to its readability, I think Mr. Isacoff could have done a better job of telling us more about the piano by tying the instrument more intimately to the stories he tells. I mean, he mentions things that were developed for and added to pianos, but does so in only a perfunctory way. There's no back story about the piano itself, no glimpses into the great piano builders and innovators, nothing about the legendary piano factories both here and abroad, nothing about materials and construction (except for a confusing cutaway diagram of the key and damper action), and just not much about the history of the piano mentioned in the title. I felt, too, that there was a lot missing. There's little mention of the piano and pianists in the movies, for example.

(Maybe this could be another book?) In fact, I was a little stunned at how little of this book is really about the actual piano. What saves this book is the insight he provides into the lives and careers of many pianists over the centuries. Probably some other authors have done a better job covering the lives of great pianists in more detail, but Mr. Isacoff's overview is functional enough in its own tightly summarized way. I'll only say again that, there are a lot of interesting stories in here loosely related to the piano, and there is probably something here for just about any reader with an interest in music history. As far as learning about the piano itself, I think *The Piano Handbook: A Complete Guide for Mastering Piano* covers the subject of the actual piano much better, though it is more about playing the piano than anything else, and if you really want to get down to the nitty gritty of the instrument, there's always Reblitz's *Piano Servicing, Tuning, and Rebuilding: For the Professional, the Student, and the Hobbyist*. *The Natural History of the Piano* is not what it says it is, but it is still a fun, interesting, and readable book on music history.

Most of the material discussed in the book is widely known among professionals, who, because they know better sources, will find many of the stories questionable or inaccurate and the commentary misleading and/or chaotic. My feeling was that the intention of the author was to create a coffee table book, a mix of anecdotes, full of quasi-professional knowledge.; maybe a textbook for curious amateurs, or a popular-science book. It naturally had to be full of simplifications and unusual assertions. Between the development of the construction of the piano, the composers of music for the piano and the pianists themselves the task became too overwhelming and the author finally lost track of his own thoughts. I did, however, learn some new names (e.g. Komitas) and I did some background checking (why is the 2nd Sarabande by Satie supposedly the most beautiful). I have never heard that Wurfel was Chopin's teacher. About 60 pages from the end the book becomes purely anecdotal and the chapters become thinner and thinner. Anecdotes about Richter, Gould or Rubinstein are perhaps entertaining for some but they did tire me out. However, throughout the book, I did appreciate the solid introduction into the world of jazz pianists. The inserts (in different font), written by other (frequently famous) people, were in my opinion not necessary. I would recommend the book, with all its faults, to undergraduate students. The book makes a decent case for a fascinating field of inquiry. It doesn't pretend to say it all. A professional can easily explain to students the difference between fact, gossip and speculation.

When I spotted this book in 'The Review' section of the Sunday Morning Post, I knew immediately that I wanted to buy it. The title, though long, was instantly catchy. After all, Mozart and modern jazz

are completely unrelated and the time in between could not have been further apart. Being a piano player and a music enthusiast, I thought that this book would be perfect for me. But one does not have to be an expert on music to find this book interesting and useful, as I discovered after it arrived. This book tells you everything, and I mean everything, about the history of the piano. It touches on every composer worth listening to. It's detailed and interesting. Those without an interest in the composers will not be disappointed either. The book tells about pianos of different times and periods too. It tells about the early harpsichords, the ornamented pianos of the Romantic stage, the early and later player pianos and the electronic pianos that we are now so accustomed to listening to. Those curious about any aspect of the piano will no doubt be satisfied and I definitely recommend it to everyone.

I've read a number of books about the piano, so I was a little hesitant to purchase yet another one. I'm glad I did though, because Mr. Isacoff has definitely found a fresh approach, and much to my delight he's come up with a lot I didn't already know. Not many people have as deep an interest in the piano as I do (I own PianoWorld.com, the world's most popular piano web site). But even I can get bored reading a bunch of facts and figures. Not a problem with *A Natural History of the Piano*. The way Isacoff weaves stories about pianists, piano music, piano makers, and pianos throughout the book, showing how each relates to the other makes for some very interesting reading. Reading this book you will certainly learn how the piano evolved, but you will also learn about the people who played the pianos and wrote the music, and how one affected the other.

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