Fig. 2. Yamaha's Disklavier Pro 2000 is in many ways the piano of the future, here today. But at $300,000, the future is when you'll be able to afford it. The very distant future.

Stanwood's helper springs installed, a technician can dial in a heavier or lighter action on your piano in about 30 minutes.

Before a technician will perform any of these procedures on your piano, they'll attend to all of the normal voicing and regulation adjustments to make sure your action is in good shape to begin with. Other than that, there really is no restriction on the type or level of piano that can benefit from this process. The cost of the Precision Touch Design, including adjustable helper springs, is approximately $2,500. Is it worth it? Well, after having the process done to his piano, Keith Jarrett commented that it opened up a whole new world of dynamic control to him.

And Precision Touch Design isn't high-tech enough for you, consider the system used on the Fazioli pianos. Famous for their tone, action, and precise hand-construction, Fazioli pianos also have an adjustable action touch weight. This system, called the Magnetic Balanced Action, was invented by Evert Snel and Hans Velo, and it will be available soon as a retrofit for uprights and grands. Magnets are located in each key, with contacts under the key and on the key frame on either side of the balance rail. One set opposes, the other attracts. Adjusting the relative positions of the magnets affects the touch weight. Adjustments are made globally, for groups of keys, or for individual keys. With this method, changing the feel of your action takes about 30 seconds. It does not, however, take into account any problems that may exist in your action due to incorrect leverage, weight inconsistencies, or friction.

Manufacturer Contacts

Baldwin, 800-876-2976, www.baldwinpiano.com
Gulbransen, 800-677-7374, www.gulbransen.com
Online Conservatory, www.onlineconservatory.com
Piano Technicians Guild, www.ptg.org
PianoDisc, 916-973-8710, www.pianodisc.com
QRS Pianomation, 716-885-4600, www.pianomation.com
Solliday Piano Service (Stanwood technician), 570-420-9588
Soltan, 914-353-3515

Touchscreen Computer Systems

MIDI retrofit and sound expansion systems have been available for acoustic pianos for years from companies such as Solton, Gulbransen, PianoDisc, and QRS Pianomation. The Yamaha Disklavier and Baldwin ConcertMaster systems have added electronic player piano capabilities to the MIDI interface concept. And companies such as Baldwin, Korg, Technics, and Yamaha have introduced touchscreen interfaces on many of their electronic keyboards.

It was Van Koevering, however, who pioneered the integration of personal computers with digital pianos. Each of the three models in their line comes with a full-on Pentium PC integrated into the instrument so it can run commercially available music software, including how-to-play programs such as Harmonic Vision's Music Ace, notation software from Sibelius, Cakewalk, and Sonic Foundry's Acid. Control of the computer is via a touchscreen interface that's mounted into the music rack. The system's interface includes a DVD drive, MIDI input and output, as well as a modem output.

If you've dreamed of being able to combine your beloved acoustic piano with a computer, you've come to the right century. This system is now available as a retrofit for any acoustic or digital piano. The model for acoustic pianos is called the Philharmonica, and includes a MIDI sensor strip, DVD drive, sound module, computer, touchscreen interface, and optional speakers. For a digital piano, the Expantia system offers the computer, touchscreen, DVD drive, and audio/MIDI interface, with an option for a sound module and speaker configuration. The price is as yet to be determined, but the preliminary estimate is around $3,000 for either system. The thin touchscreen can be positioned anywhere on your music rack. Imagine being able to create Acid loops of your favorite Hanon exercises without ever getting up from your piano bench — boggles the mind.

This vision of the future has also materialized in the form of Yamaha's Disklavier Pro 2000 (see Figure 2). Currently on a demo tour, this acoustic grand piano features a futuristic cherry wood and aluminum case, an integrated Pentium III processor with touchscreen interface, a DVD drive that reads QuickTime movies, and voice control. We're not sure, but we think you can just play it, too — although if you can come up with the $300,000 for it, you may want to hire someone else to play it.

Internet Piano Instruction

Now that the Internet has spawned a workforce of telecommuters, the time may be ripe for a generation of tele-educators, too. The Online Conservatory has established a website where students can search for teachers according to the style they'd like to learn to play. Unlike traditional one-on-one instruction, the student and teacher need not be in the same city, state, or country: They meet on the Online Conservatory's website.

The system uses proprietary free software that can be downloaded from the website. The software puts a virtual keyboard on the teacher's and student's computer screens, where either party can see the notes played by the other. Both student and teacher play on their own MIDI keyboards or MIDIed pianos. Other than the onscreen virtual keyboard, the lesson itself is all audio: Using two-way audio technology, the teacher and student talk to and play for each other through microphones.

One drawback is that this technology is PC-only; Mac users will have to wait — or take lessons in person. And while teacher and student can hear each other, the teacher can't observe the student's technique. So it's certainly no substitute for in-person instruction, though it can be great for picking up on a new style of music.

Payment is made directly to the teacher, who sends a percentage of the fee to the Online Conservatory. Reports are that the faster your Internet connection, the better the results, assuming online congestion is equal. At least an online teacher isn't going to rap your knuckles with