

# Helpinstill Piano Sensor

By James Elizando

I don't know what it is with me and my knack for finding the coolest and most obscure devices that actually work. Yes, I am flattering myself a little too much, seeing that this device has been around since the 1970s. The old timers (I'm not saying this as a jab but out of sincere respect for the wealth of knowledge that can only come with being old) are probably saying, "Silly youngster, I've been using one of those for years." But I am also sure that some of the younger generation like myself is completely oblivious to the existence of the heaven-sent device called the Helpinstill Piano Sensor. It's a shame that some of us have never heard of one, considering that it has been used by the likes of Sir Elton John, Ronnie Milsap, Norah Jones, Alicia Keys, and a host of other touring piano acts. Don't believe me; just take a gander at the user list on their Web site, WWW.helpinstill.com. It's vast!

heaven-sent creation called a Helpinstill Piano Sensor. I am going to keep you on the edge of your seats and refrain from telling you what it is just yet. First I must preface with a small story.

Several years back, we had an eight-foot Yamaha grand donated to the church. Our pastor was so excited because he wanted one for years. At this point I was given the awesome (insert a little more sarcasm here) job of miking the thing. Let me tell you, we tried nearly everything, being budget-conscious of course. In the end we went for a pair of A-T 414's with the piano lid closed to try to cut out as much noise as possible. The problem that we ran into was the piano sounded thin because it needed to high pass so much to avoid "elephants." And the other problem was that I couldn't get that thing loud enough in the wedge for the piano player. I'd already tried C tape and a Barcus Berry sensor, so I



The Helpinstill Piano Sensor (yellow), includes three pickups, one for the high register, mid-register and low register.



The pickup pedestals can be tweaked to reduce the almost painful amount of attack generated by hard-playing performers.

**Because it's magnetic, the sensor only produces signal when a string moves, and it doesn't pick up any ambient noise. I can send the piano through the subs to make it sound nice and beefy, and I have no feedback problems at all.**

Okay, before I dig myself into a deeper hole with the older crowd, lets get into it. Let me start by asking this question. Has anyone else had an awesome (insert sarcasm here) time attempting to mic a live piano in a band? I have had the aforementioned awesome time more times than I'd care to admit.

## The Gigs

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Once again, the gig is in a church. Now to paint the proper picture, my church is on the larger side. We average around 1,800 in attendance at every service. The sanctuary is a huge concrete box with an open beam ceiling, a corrugated metal roof, and 1/3 of the sanctuary double as a gym during the week for the private school at the church. To say the acoustics are less than desirable would be an understatement. I use all 48 of the inputs on my trusty MH3, one of those inputs being devoted to the piano. Yes, that's not a misprint, ONE. When you see that my input list includes a full complement of drums, a pair of electric guitars, acoustic and bass guitars, percussion, two sets of keyboards, a horn section, a six-person ensemble, and a choir, you may ask, how do you even hear a piano only using one input? My friends, let me tell you, it is by using a

wasn't sure what to do.

So I Googled (is that a word?) how to mic a piano. I read lame article after lame article, and on the third or fourth Google page I saw this Web site offering up a Helpinstill Piano Sensor. This warranted investigation. I read on and found that it is a truly simple magnetic pickup just like the one found a guitar. They offer it in a standard model or a humbucker if you require the extra noise reduction. They only cost \$550 or \$850 respectively. The best part of the whole deal is that they actually tell you to buy the cheaper one first and try it. If it doesn't meet your standards, send it back and they'll exchange it for the humbucker for nothing more than the difference in price. And to top it all off, if you just don't like the thing you can send it back within 90 days and they'll give you your hard earned dough back. How rad is that?

When you unwrap your new present you'll find three pickups — one for the high register, one for the mid register, and one for the low register on the piano. Each has an 1/8-inch cable that connects to a proprietary passive DI with an attenuator for each pickup built in, so you can blend the three pickups together to balance the overall sound of the piano. The DI has a XLR output as well as a hi-Z output to connect to

an amp if desired. You'll also find three adjustable pedestals that the pickups mount on. This gives you the ability to raise and lower the pickups to further tweak the pickup to your individual need. Right out of the box it will take you less than 15 minutes to install and mere seconds to fall in love with.

The unit really does perform well. Because it's magnetic, the sensor only produces signal when a string moves, and it doesn't pick up any ambient noise. You can have the lid of the piano open or closed and it makes no difference. I can send the piano through the subs to make it sound nice and beefy, and I have no feedback problems at all. I've actually had a Helpinstill for about two years and have been nothing but happy with it overall. The only point of contention that I've had with it personally is that if you have a player that plays really hard, you will notice that it has an almost painful amount of attack. But a few simple corrections on

the lone EQ strip fix that problem. On a completely irrelevant note, our piano tuner always gripes that it's in his way when he tunes. But who really cares about that? **FOH**

## Helpinstill Piano Sensor

**What It Is:** Magnetic pickup for acoustic piano

**Who It's For:** Anyone who needs to amplify an acoustic piano

**Pros:** The purchasing process is great, the product is easy to use, there's no feedback, it only takes up one channel, and it's very cost-effective.

**Cons:** It can be a little harsh with a heavy-handed player if you don't adjust it for that performer, and it's inconvenient if you're a piano tuner.

**How Much:** \$550 to \$850.