

## Key Issues: Virtual Piano Recording Tips

By [Cliff Goldmacher](#)

While nothing beats a well-played, well-recorded grand piano for feel, tone, and authenticity, most of us don't have the income or studio space required for the real thing. Fortunately, today's sampled software pianos are getting so good that in some (though certainly not all) instances they are virtually indistinguishable from the real thing. But let's not even try to compare real and sampled pianos; instead, let's take full advantage of the options that software pianos provide.

### MIDI

The primary advantage of recording using a software piano is that you're using MIDI to trigger it, and MIDI gives you options. From fixing a wrong note to quantizing an entire piano part, recording a MIDI track of your sampled piano allows you to go in after the fact and tweak elements of your performance. This helps avoid tedious punching or multiple takes.

For example, if you've recorded a piano part and (as is often the case these days) you're playing to a drum loop, even subtle tempo fluctuations become glaringly obvious. By quantizing the piano part (I prefer an 1/8-note quantize in most instances), you can lock it to the loop's groove of the loop in a way that would be almost impossible otherwise.

However, before I quantize, I'll copy the original MIDI track, label it, and bury it in a playlist so that if something goes horribly wrong in the quantize, I'll still have the original. Also, there are often places in a piano part that shouldn't be quantized, like grace notes or little flams. In those cases, I'll copy the needed section from the original track, and paste it into the quantized track.

MIDI also gives you the luxury of auditioning alternate sounds. Let's say that as you listen back to a mix you decide that a honky-tonk piano would sound better: Just go back to your software piano, and find the right sound. Or, even more dramatically, you can experiment with entirely different instrument sounds triggered by the MIDI information from the piano part.

Finally, although there are programs that can change the pitch and time of digital audio, key and tempo changes in MIDI are more precise and don't produce distracting audio artifacts—no matter how dramatic the difference between the new key or tempo and the original.

### Piano Session Setup

Let's start with the basics of recording your piano, as you need to capture not only audio but also MIDI information (Figure 1). Let's begin with the MIDI track. In some recording software, the MIDI track also acts as a playback track so you can actually assign the software piano plug-in directly to the MIDI track itself. In others, you'll need a stand-alone MIDI track and an auxiliary track to which you'll assign your software piano plug-in. You'll also need an audio (usually stereo) track to record the actual audio—we'll see why this is important in a bit.

As setting up a session to record a software piano involves several steps, consider creating a software piano recording template that's ready to copy into a new session. You can then avoid having to create these tracks every time you want to make a piano recording.

### Printing to Audio

I highly recommend bouncing your MIDI-triggered sampled piano to a digital audio track when you're satisfied with the part (Figure 2). One reason is that software pianos can be a real drain on your system. By printing the audio and de-activating the piano plug-in, you'll end up with more available processing power for other plug-ins in your mix.

Another reason is that if your software piano company goes under, then the next time there are updates to the version of your recording software or your computer's OS, you'll be in trouble if your sampled piano software is no longer compatible. If you go back to an old session and find that the plug-in no longer works, you'll be very glad you printed the audio. Recording your MIDI piano's audio is your insurance policy against software-related headaches.

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