

# HELPISTILL PIANO SENSOR

Model 280  
For Grand Pianos



Please Read Instructions Carefully  
Before Using Your Helpinstill

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## Model 280 For Grand Pianos

Your complete unit consists of the following pieces:  
3 Humbucking Sensors in lengths of 24", 16" and 14"  
1 Gold Double Support Bar  
2 Silver Underbars with adjustable pedestals  
Standard Mixer or Phantom Power Mixer (Optional)  
Screwdriver for adjustment of pedestals  
Owners Manual - Please read this first!



# Installation

A Video showing the entire Installation is available on our website at [www.helpinstill.com](http://www.helpinstill.com) or on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bt9XpECy9pQ&t=45s>



The silver support bars are used to support two sensors under the middle and treble strings. The gold double support bar suspends the third sensor over the bass strings.

Before installing any of the pickup strips, remove the tie wraps from the cables and **smooth out, stretch and straighten the cables**. If they kink and curl under the strings, they may touch them and cause a buzzing noise.

The **longest pickup strip is always used under the highest notes**. Select which of the remaining two best fits the width of the bass section ( usually the medium length) and attach it to the magnetic strip on the gold support bar. This bar then rests on the frame pieces on either side of the bass notes, and the double wingnut adjustment is used to hang the sensor strip about 1/4" over these strings. The gold bar has gray non-slip pads where it rests on the piano frame to eliminate rattles and minimize movement from vibration. This bar may be placed anywhere along strings, but the best sound will be achieved about 1/5 of the way from the end of the string at either end. The illustration shows the sensor at the far end from the keyboard, but it may also be placed at the other end near the area where the hammers strike the strings.

The copper-wound bass strings generate less signal in the pickups because copper is not magnetic, and only the steel core of these string produces output. Therefore, the limitation of the volume of the whole unit depends on adjusting the pickup hanging over the bass end until it is **as close to the strings as possible** without the strings buzzing on the pickup when played hard. This is usually about 1/8 inch of clearance. The other two pickups can be further away.

Next place the other two sensors on the silver underbars, the longest sensor on the longest bar. ( They will stick on quite firmly because of their magnetic nature.) These support bars rest on pedestals that are padded to prevent scratching the soundboard, and to minimize vibration to the sensors. Make sure the screws of these pedestals are on either side of the sensors so that they will be adjustable from above. These two units are simply slid in under the strings from the left side of the piano, the longest first so it will end up under the highest notes. **If the clearance between the strings and the soundboard seems too close, and the tops of the pedestal screws hit the strings when sliding in, move them nearer the bridge (that's the end of the strings farthest from the keyboard.)** The screws will be the right height when the sensor is finally in place.



### **Sliding the High Sensor In**

After the sensors are in place under the strings, stick the small screwdriver through the strings and turn the pedestal screw to adjust the clearance between the sensor and the strings to about 1/8" at the highest notes to about 1/4" in the middle of the piano.

The position of the highest sensor is critical under the highest few notes. Try to align this sensor at a straightened angle that will keep its upper end as far away from the keys as possible to keep the top hammers from striking the sensor. The length of these highest strings allows just enough space for this clearance.

After the sensors are in place under the strings, stick the small screwdriver through the strings and turn the pedestal screw to adjust the clearance between the sensor and the strings to about 1/8" at the highest notes to about 1/4" in the middle of the piano. The sensors do not pick up any string movement over the last 1/4" on each end. Be careful to place the middle and highest pickups so that they overlap slightly to insure that the notes at their boundaries are properly picked up.

After placing the middle pickup in place under the strings, it helps to use the screwdriver to tuck the wire from the highest pickup under the middle bracket to insure that it won't curl up and touch the strings and cause buzzing noises.



When removing these units from the piano it is perfectly okay to use the wires to pull them out of the piano. These wires are very strongly attached inside the sensors and nearly impossible to pull loose.

## **Adjustment & Hookup**

After the sensors are in place in the piano, run the wires out the left side of the piano and plug each one into the corresponding input jack on the mixer, or into a mic channel if not using a mixer. Either or both of the outputs can then be connected to a sound system or amplifier.

For proper adjustment and balancing of the pickup levels, the signal needs to be routed to a monitor speaker or amp near the piano that is louder than the natural sound of the piano. The pickup can be used with the lid of the piano open or closed (it makes no difference to the pickup), but it is easier to tell the real volumes of the sensors with the lid shut.

Moving the middle pickup as close to the keyboard as possible will result in the best tone in that region; moving it further back will tend to emphasize the lower harmonics, resulting in more of an electric piano sound. There is a "sweet spot" about 2 inches beyond the dampers that is the best tone.

## **Using Without Mixer**

The Model 280 can be used without a mixer. Since the Sensor cables terminate in XLR-type connectors, they can be plugged into the inputs of any mixer or soundboard with mic level channel inputs. Care should be taken to insure that the three channels involved are at suitable volume levels to result in uniform reproduction across the width of the keyboard. Sections can then be equalized differently to bring out harmonics in different areas. Some physical adjustment of the clearances between the Sensors and the strings may be necessary to regulate the volumes uniformly.



If the piano signal seems to accentuate the notes at top end of the highest pickup too much, use the screwdriver pedestal adjustment to move that pickup further away from the strings on the high end rather than rolling off the high frequency equalization on the piano channel, since that would dull the tone of the whole piano. In general, the two pickups under the strings need to be about the same distance from the strings at either end of the pickup. If they are slanted in height, it will be impossible to adjust the volumes across the whole keyboard to be smooth and balanced.

Play test notes on the piano in the following order: first, play notes at near either end of each sensor; this will insure that the brackets are level. If they are not, use the screwdriver pedestal adjustments to balance. Then, play notes on either side of the junctions between sensors while using the control box volume knobs to smooth the transition between pickups. After this procedure is followed, the entire keyboard is now being reproduced at uniform volume.

In a permanent installation, such as a church or club, it is always a good idea to request that the piano tuner not move the pickups around, since that will obviously change the installation. The position of the pickups is rarely in the tuner's way, yet they often have a tendency to move the pickup brackets out of the way and not move them back when they're finished.

## **Troubleshooting**

As durable as the Helpinstill systems have proven to be over the years, any instrument can malfunction.

**Sensors** It is important that care is taken not to puncture the outer plastic casing of the sensors. The sensors are made to be flexible and durable, but contain hair-fine wires on the interior which could possibly be broken under extreme treatment.

If you suspect that a sensor is not working, measure it with an ohmmeter at the output plug between pins 2 & 3. Each sensor should read between 50-200 ohms. There should be no fluctuation of this measurement with bending or tapping on the sensor. If this measurement is consistent, the sensor will definitely work properly in the system.

**Buzzing Noises** Aside from mechanical buzzing of the strings against the pickup or wires, buzzing noise or hum of an electrical nature has two primary causes: ground problems between the unit and the mic line it's plugged into, and electromagnetic interference in the vicinity of the piano. The Model 280 was developed with humbucking-style coils that virtually eliminate any chance of hum pickup. Any hum is probably a result of interconnection with the sound system and can be isolated as follows:

**1. System problems** If ground-loop buzzing is encountered, try unplugging the mic cable from the control box and plugging it into an ordinary dynamic microphone, such as an SM-58. The continued presence of the hum in the system would, of course, rule out the piano pickup as its source. This sounds obvious, but it's surprising how often in our experience this turns out to be the case.

**2. Ground Loops** If the previous mic-switching test seems to indicate hum only when the piano pickup is connected, try patching the output of the piano pickup into a direct box with a ground lift, and plugging the mic cable into the direct box. Lifting the ground at the direct box may then eliminate the hum.

As always, making sure the signal from the pickup is maximized through closer pickup-to-string proximity will minimize any hum.

**A Note On Tone:** Moving the middle pickup as close to the keyboard as possible will result in better tone in that region; moving it further back will tend to emphasize the lower harmonics, resulting in more of an electric piano or "Rhodes" sound. This area of the piano seems to be more critical in pickup placement to achieving a "realistic" tone than the bass and high sensors. Sometimes a movement of as little as 1/2" along the strings will dramatically alter the balance of harmonics and, as a result, regain the familiar sound of the piano in that region.

## **Warranty**

When you own a Helpinstill, you're a member of the family. We want your unit to work forever, and we'll do whatever it takes to keep you satisfied. Call us anytime at (713) 432-1089 with questions or suggestions, or e-mail us at [pianopickup@aol.com](mailto:pianopickup@aol.com), or visit our website at

**[www.helpinstill.com](http://www.helpinstill.com)**



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