

# THE UNIVERSAL DRUM

*and other percussion musical instruments*



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A world without music is unimaginable. It is a fundamental form of human expression and its influence is felt in our daily life, carrying the energy of our deepest human experience. In this latest journey into musical instruments (I previously discussed the guitar, piano and the violin), I will specifically look at drums and mention some other sounding instruments that together make up what is commonly referred to as percussion instruments. In my research for this article a wealth of information

has been revealed to me that I will convey to the reader, mostly in the form of original quotes. Never in my experience was I aware that so many instruments fell in this grouping of instruments. In more recent popular music culture, it is almost impossible to name three or four rock, hip-hop, rap, funk or even soul charts or songs that do not have some sort of percussive beat keeping the tune in time.

'A percussion instrument is any object which produces a sound by being hit with an implement, shaken, rubbed, scraped, or by any other action which sets the object into vibration. The term usually applies to an object used in a rhythmic context or with musical intent. The word "percussion" has evolved from Latin terms:

"percussion" (which translates as "to beat, strike" in the musical sense, rather than the violent action), and "percussus" (which is a noun meaning "a beating"). As a noun in contemporary English it is described as "the collision of two bodies to produce a sound". The usage of the term is not unique to music but also has application in medicine and weaponry, as in percussion cap, yet all known and common uses of the word "percussion", appear to share a similar lineage beginning with the original Latin: "percussus". In a musical context then, the term "percussion instruments" may have been coined originally to describe a family of instruments including drums, rattles, metal plates, or wooden blocks which musicians would beat or strike (as in a collision) to produce sound.' ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Percussion\\_instrument](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Percussion_instrument))

It has been speculated by historians and anthropologists that percussion instruments were the first musical devices ever created. It includes any instrument that produces sounds when it is struck, scrapped or shaken. Struck percussion instruments can be simple, such as a drum that you hit with a hand or with drumsticks.

'Asia Minor is where most of the percussion instruments that we see in the orchestra first came from. In the 15th century when people began moving east they brought with them many instruments. Our percussion instruments got their beginnings there. During the Crusades the Crusaders brought back the drums that they found in the Middle East.' ([Library.thinkquest.org](http://Library.thinkquest.org))

'Percussion in music is universal. There is not a country in the world that does not make percussion instruments of some kind to provide a rhythmic backbone for its music. Drums are probably the world's oldest musical instruments, but percussion is used in many effects that are not simply rhythmic: many instruments such as cymbals, shakers and jingles make more continuous, but exciting, noises, while a single stroke on a gong may create a dramatic climax to a musical work.' (Wade-Matthews, Max. **The world encyclopedia of musical instruments.**- Lorenz Bks., 2000. p.188.)

Percussion instruments are classified by various criteria, sometimes depending on their construction, ethnic origin, function within musical theory and orchestration. They play not only rhythm, but also melody and harmony.

'Percussion is commonly referred to as "the backbone" or "the heartbeat" of a musical ensemble, often working in close collaboration with bass instruments, when present. In jazz and other popular music ensembles, the bassist and the drummer are often referred to as the rhythm section. Most classical pieces written for full orchestra since the time of Hayden and Mozart are orchestrated to place emphasis on the strings, woodwinds, and brass. However, often at least one pair of timpani is included, though they rarely play continuously. Rather, they serve to provide additional accents when needed. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, other percussion instruments (like the triangle or cymbals) have been used, again relatively sparingly in general. The use of percussion instruments became more frequent in the twentieth century classical music.' ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Percussion\\_instrument](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Percussion_instrument))

Percussion plays a major role in various styles of music, best noted in military marching bands where it is the major function of the bass drum that guides the soldiers to march in time to the beat of the music at a regular pace.

### Kettledrums

The kettledrum is the leader of the drum family and is shaped like a big pot - the largest of the drum family. Its origins can be traced to

Babylonian times and it is also referred to in Akkadian texts. Kettledrums were also used in the Middle East in early Islamic times and this usage was adopted in Europe for martial music during the time of the Crusades. Large kettledrums were developed during the 14th and 15th centuries in Germany and later became a feature in the Hungarian cavalry whose drummer would carry them attached to his horse. The origin of their name stems from the fact that they were made of copper in the shape of soup kettles. Owing to the shape of the body, the kettledrum produces a note of definite musical pitch. Orchestral kettledrums (also known as timpani) play an important function in the harmonic structure of the orchestra. The sounds emitted from the kettledrum are deep and resembles the sounds associated with thunder or that of cannons. The use of this instrument can be best noted in classical compositions such as in the **1812 Overture** by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the **Symphony no 9 (Choral)** by Ludwig van Beethoven and the **Symphony no 103 (Drum Roll)** by Joseph Haydn.



### Bass drums

The bass drum is the largest keyed drum in the orchestra but does not have the definite pitch of the kettledrum. It remained a rarity in Europe until the 18th century when it became well known through the Turkish Janissary bands that were fashionable at the time. This is a descendant of the 14th-century Turkish davul and was introduced into the orchestra by Michael Haydn in his **Turkish Suite** (1777) and in Joseph Haydn's **Symphony no 100 (Military)** of 1794. Other better known classical pieces where this instrument plays a prominent role are in works such as the **Symphony no 4** by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, **Polovtsian Dances** by Alexander Borodin and the **Symphony no 9 (Choral)** by Ludwig van Beethoven.

Although drums have different shapes and sizes, they all consist of a hollow body over which a membrane, or head, is stretched. All have two heads - the upper head is played and the head underneath has little strips of gut or metal stretched across it which vibrate to make the desired sound. Different drums have evolved all over the world to provide a rhythmic foundation for music.



### Other percussion instruments

Other percussion instruments include the cymbal, tambourine, castanets, triangle, cow bells, wood blocks, gongs, et cetera, and are smaller, hand-held instruments. One also must not forget the xylophone that is a set of tuned wooden percussion blocks laid out in a row parallel to one another and are played by being hit with sticks, as well as the related glockenspiel and marimba.

Of course there are other percussion instruments not mentioned here and one can read more about them in titles such as **Percussion** by James Holland and **Percussion instruments and**

**their history** by James Blades. An attractively illustrated introduction to percussion instruments covering their history and shapes and sounds is Rocky Maffit's

**Rhythm & beauty: the art of percussion.**

Readers interested in playing drums will enjoy titles such as **The complete idiot's guide**

**to playing drums** by Arthur Miller and in the *Crash course* series, **Drums** by Pete Riley. For those interested in making drums, the title by Dennis Waring called **Making drums** will be a wonderful find. It is tastefully illustrated and offers information in an accessible manner.

In recent years the drum and some other percussion instruments have again gained further importance. In modern society we live under a great deal of emotional and ideological restraint, as well as suppressed creativity. The drum is regarded as one of the oldest instruments producing a very primitive sound. The sound and rhythm of drumming is of elementary importance to humankind as it stimulates spontaneous expression and has in recent times become quite popular as a valuable tool in music therapy. Drumming is one of the simplest and most direct ways of accessing creative energy.

'Drums and sounding instruments - including gongs - have a special influence on listeners among all primitive peoples; they have always known and used drums to affect the body and the subconscious. Scientific research is now exploring and confirming the physical, mental, and emotional influence of percussion. Powerful force-fields of sounds and tones can transport us to different regions of consciousness and stimulate physical energy. That is why sound and rhythm have a nourishing, psychological, and physical appeal. The growing demand for percussion and sound effect instruments is a symptom of our need to recover access to the nourishing power of music.' (Klower, Tom. **The joy of drumming: drums & percussion instruments from around the world.**- Binkey Kok, 1997. p.3.)

As in the previous three articles, it must be brought to readers' attention that this is just a briefing on the topic. Following is a selected booklist.

### Booklist

#### History and description

- Blades, James. **Percussion instruments and their history.**- Faber, 1970.
- Hart, Mickey. **Planet drum.**- HarperSanFrancisco, c1991.
- Helm, Russell Buddy. **The way of the drum.**- Llewellyn, 2001.
- Holland, James. **Percussion.**- Macdonald, 1978.
- Klower, Tom. **The joy of drumming.**- Binkey Kok, 1997.
- Maffit, Rocky. **Rhythm & beauty: the art of percussion.**- Billboard, 2005.
- Wade-Matthews, Max. **The world encyclopedia of musical instruments.**- Lorenz Bks., 2000.



#### Construction and repair

Summit, Ginger and Widness, Jim. **Making gourd musical instruments: [over 60 string, wind & percussion instruments & how to play them].**- Sterling, 2002.

Waring, Dennis. **Making drums.**- Sterling, 2003.

#### Self-instruction and technique

Blades, James and Dean, Johnny. **How to play drums.**- Elm Tree Bks., 1985.

Blades, James. **Ready to play: stories with percussion sound.**- B.B.C., 1978.

Hart, Mickey. **Drumming at the edge of magic: a journey into the spirit of percussion.**- Harper, c1990.

Miller, Michael. **The complete idiot's guide to playing drums.**- Alpha Bks., c2000.

Peckman, Jon. **Picture yourself drumming: step-by-step instruction for drum kit setup, reading music, learning from the pros, and more.**- Thomson, 2007.

Ryan, Lloyd. **The complete drum tutor.**- Duckworth, 1991.

Riley, Pete. **Crash course drums.**- SMT, c2003.

#### Juvenile non-fiction

Dearling, Robert. **Percussion & electronic instruments.**- Chelsea House, 2001.

Knight, MJ. **Percussion.**- F.Watts, 2005.

#### Self-instruction (juvenile non-fiction)

O'Brien, Eileen. **Learn to play drums.**- Usborne, 1998.

#### Forthcoming titles

**African classical ensemble music: theory and drum-based concert series.**- African Minds, 2009.

