



## A Guide to Buying Percussion Instruments

### TUNED PERCUSSION:

There are many types of tuned percussion instruments, but this document focusses on the ones you're most likely to meet in a classroom – small, self-contained instruments with the note bars sitting on top of a wooden box or on a simple frame. It doesn't cover larger 'orchestral' instruments with large bars that come on sturdy metal frames, that you stand to play.

There are two main types of small tuned percussion instruments that you will encounter: glockenspiels and xylophones. They are both usually played with sticks that have round ends that can be hard or soft and made out of plastic, rubber, wood or woollen yarn. Never underestimate the importance of the stick in making the sound – a good set of sticks can turn a group of harsh tinny noisemakers into a wonderful & evocative ensemble.

**Glockenspiels** are made of metal. They tend to be small and cheap, so can be easy to get hold of, but can often sound quite thin & harsh. They can be great as 'special effect' instruments, but a whole class of them may be quite grating to hear.

You can also get glockenspiels with larger, aluminium note bars that sound very mellow. They can work far better as lead instruments.



**Xylophones** are made of wood (usually some kind of rosewood) & are more versatile & less piercing than glockenspiels. There is less choice of cheap xylophone. Lower instruments (alto) tend to sound warmer & have more resonance – ie they're nicer :-). Bass models are available and sound lovely but prices start at around £400 for a diatonic instrument.

Classroom xylophones tend to come on box resonators, and usually you get one box for the 'white' notes of a piano, and another box for the 'black' notes.



The best instruments have both sets of notes, and come on stands with resonator tubes rather than boxes, but they tend to be much bigger & more expensive (prices start around £800).

Prices for diatonic glockenspiels can start from around £80, and xylophones from around £200

Good makes of tuned percussion include Sonor, Goldon and Mapex. Good makes of sticks include Chalklin and Percussion Plus.

## UNTUNED PERCUSSION

There are plenty of hand drums to be bought out there. Some of the more usual types are:

**Bongos** – Cuban drums, come as a pair of connected drums. Quite small, high pitched. Usually played with hands and can be quite hard to get a good sound. Sound OK with sticks.

Good drums for cutting through a big sound.

You can get them for £20 upwards, but it's better to spend nearer £50 to get a good instrument.



**Congas** – Cuban drums, often played in pairs but come singly. Large (av. Size about 30inches tall, up to 12inches diameter). Easier to get a good/big sound. Usually played with hands but OK with soft sticks too.

Good drums for laying down a groove.

Some companies make 'Tubanos', which are essentially tube shaped congas. They don't sound quite the same, but pretty similar & are cheaper. Expect to spend £130 upwards for a single drum

**Djembe** – West African drums, have many different names. Come in a range of sizes, but often about the same size as a conga. Played with hands. Skins tend to be thinner than congas, so sticks aren't recommended.

Good drum for low bass sounds & grooves.

I would recommend a medium-sized djembe if space & pocket allows – they're more versatile than smaller ones. I'd suggest a 10inch drum or above (other players may have different opinions!).

Expect to spend £60 upwards.





**Cajon** – Originally from Peru. Essentially it's a customised packing crate to sit on & play. Some people use just one or two sounds played with their hands, some people use hands, sticks, brushes & footpedals! It's up to you. Available in kids sizes, adult sizes, or as kits to build yourself.

Good for creating a drum-kit like rhythm with high & low sounds.

Prices start around £25 for a kids' size, 60 for adult size, £30 for a DIY kit

## OTHER GOOD INSTRUMENTS TO HAVE:

### Tambourine

Cheap & easy to find, lots of sounds to make. I'd recommend spending at least £20 to get a useable one, and definitely recommend getting one with a skin – they have a much better range of sounds available.



### Triangle

Much more versatile than their reputation suggests, and a wonderful little instrument.

Prices start around £5, but if you can get one for £10-15, it'll be significantly richer in tone.

### Shaker

Easy to find or make, from the humble shakey egg to the mighty shekere.



Good makes for all these drums & percussion instruments include Remo, Sonor, LP, Thomann, Percussion Plus, Toca, Meinl. They are all decent makes, and all have entry-level instruments.