

# History of Percussion in Music and Theater

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Percussion instruments are constructed with sonorous materials, and these materials vibrate to make music when the instruments are struck or shaken, thus producing sounds at varying pitches. For indefinite pitch instruments, the specific pitch produced depends on the tautness of the sonorous material. Definite pitch instruments will produce a pitch that is determined by the size of the instrument, with the sound created by striking the instrument in specific areas.

## History of Percussion

Drums can be found in history predating 6000 B.C., and these instruments have been a part of a wide variety of theater performances. The first drums were very rudimentary in nature, involving any items that could be hit to make a sound. Slowly, drums changed and became more detailed. With a strong connection to sacred and ceremonial celebrations in Africa, percussion instruments often symbolize tribal royalty, and they have also been used to send messages over long distances. During the Renaissance period in Europe, drums played an important role in the military, enabling soldiers to send coded messages and instructions to each other across many miles.

Percussion instruments produce sounds by scraping, plucking, striking, or shaking. Thus, all drums and bells are a part of the percussion family of instruments. Within the main percussion family, instruments are subdivided according to those that can produce a definite pitch and those that don't. Percussion instruments include bongos, snares, pancake drums, buffalo drums, and more. Other members of the percussion family include cymbals, maracas, rain sticks, woodblocks, castanets, triangles, bells, and shakers. Virtually anyone can play a drum with little to no musical training; all you need is a sense of rhythm. It's also possible to produce percussion sounds without the need for specialized instruments. With creativity and improvisation, a hand drum can be made out of almost anything, including pots and pans in the kitchen or an empty box from the recycle bin.







## Percussion Instruments

- **Timpani:** Timpani are also known as kettle drums. These large, copper pots have drum heads made out of either plastic or calf skin. Timpani require tuning, and they are capable of playing various pitches. Loosening or tightening the drum heads will change the pitch of the timpani. These drums come in a variety of sizes, and they provide melody, harmony, and rhythm in an orchestra. The timpanist plays this instrument by hitting the drum heads with sticks or mallets.
- **Xylophone:** The xylophone originated in Asia and Africa. This instrument has keys or bars that resemble a piano's, but the musician makes sounds on the xylophone by hitting the keys with a mallet. Different mallets will produce varying pitches, and the pitch can also be varied by the way the mallet hits the keys. Additional instruments like the xylophone include the vibraphone, the marimba, and the glockenspiel.
- **Cymbals:** Cymbals are large discs made out of spun bronze. They are untuned percussion instruments, and they vary in size. Larger cymbals produce a lower sound. Within an orchestra, cymbals are used for sound effects and to emphasize the rhythm. Producing sounds with cymbals happens by banging them together or by hitting them with a brush or mallet.
- **Triangle:** The triangle is a small bar made out of metal and shaped into a triangle. Triangles range in sound, with larger ones producing a lower pitch. Playing the triangle involves holding it so it dangles by a string and hitting it using a metal beater.
- **Snare Drum:** The snare drum has a hollow cylinder with drum heads of plastic or calf skin stretched over the ends. Wire-wrapped strings stretch over the snare, which is the bottom drum head. These strings produce a rattling sound when a drummer hits the drum head with mallets, brushes, or drumsticks. This untuned percussion piece does not produce specific pitches. Snare drums are an integral part of a band's or orchestra's rhythm section, and they are known for the drum rolls they can produce.
- **Bass Drum:** The bass drum is the largest instrument in the percussion family, so it produces the lowest sound. Similar to the snare in construction but without the snares, the bass drum is an untuned instrument. The drummer produces sounds by hitting the drum head with special drum sticks covered with felt or sheepskin.
- **Tambourine:** The tambourine is a circular percussion instrument with metal bells or jingles along the edge of the wood. Tambourines have a drum head, and the jingles are not tuned to a particular note. Playing a tambourine involves shaking, hitting, or tapping it against one hand.
- **Maracas:** Maracas originated in Mexico. These shakers are often made out of gourds, wood, or plastic. They are filled with ball bearings, beads, seeds, or beans. To play maracas, a person holds them in the hands and shakes them.

- **Gong:** These massive metal plates hang on a metal frame. Similar to cymbals, gongs are untuned, but they are much larger than cymbals. To play a gong, the player uses a soft mallet and hits the center of the plate. The strength of the strike will produce either a very loud crash or a softer sound.
- **Chimes:** Chimes also hang from a frame. These metal tubes have different lengths and sizes, each producing a different pitch depending on the size of the chime. To play chimes, the player uses a mallet to strike them.
- **Castanets:** Castanets add a pleasing clicking sound to an orchestra. Originating in Spain, castanets are simply two wood pieces fastened together. Playing castanets involves holding them in one hand and pushing the wood pieces together. Castanets can also be mounted onto a wood base, in which case they can be played by striking them with the hands.
- **Celesta:** The celesta resembles a small piano with between 49 and 65 keys. Playing the celesta involves pressing the keys with the fingers, which causes an internal hammer to strike a metal bar to produce sounds. It's possible to play multiple notes together on the celesta by using both hands.

