

Percussion Instruments

6 Articles

Check articles you have read:

☐

Percussion
313 words

☐

Friends & Relatives (Percussion)
346 words

☐

Cymbals
88 words

☐

Piano
114 words

☐

Celesta
67 words

☐

Harp
215 words

Percussion

By John Bertles

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.



Percussion Instruments

The percussion section is more international than any other section in the orchestra. Just look at the variety of instruments! Some, like the shekere [pronounced like "sheckeray"], come from Africa; others, like bongo drums, guiros, and maracas, from Latin America; the gong, from China; the castanets, from Spain.

Percussion instruments go back into ancient history. The timpani or kettledrums, for example, go back so many years it is impossible to be sure what country invented them. There are ancient

Egyptian and Greek illustrations, going back thousands of years, that show timpani being played – sometimes being towed on a chariot to be played during a battle – and they looked pretty much the same as they do now! In some cultures, percussion instruments have uses that go beyond music. Native Americans, Polynesians, and some of the peoples of Asia, used drums, gongs, and other percussion instruments to communicate with their gods and to accompany religious rituals. Some African peoples use their spectacular hand drumming to send messages from one village to another.

Military groups and other marching organizations use drums to help them keep the beat when they march. Circus bands use a long roll on the snare drum to create suspense for tricks by acrobats and aerialists. And in Avery Fisher Hall, you will hear a recorded signal reminding you to take your seat when the concert is about to begin. This signal is played on the glockspiel, or bells! People have always made percussion instruments out of materials they have on hand. Drums have been made from hollowed-out tree trunks and hammered-in oil barrels; xylophones and marimbas, from bars of wood. Africans learned to dry out giant gourds, string them with beads, and make them into shekeres. Christopher Lamb learned to do this, too; he made the shekeres you will hear him play when you come to the Philharmonic!

Friends & Relatives (Percussion)

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.

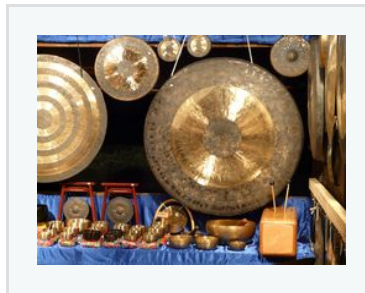
Drums

The Chinese have a wooden drum they call a mu-yu ("wooden fish"). It is round and hollow, like a temple block.

The Hawaiians make a drum called a pahu hula ("dance drum"). They make this by hollowing out a log and stretching shark skin over the end. They also make a coconut-shell knee drum called a puniu, also with a fish-skin head. The drum is attached to the player's leg and is played with a little strap made from braided leaves.

Gongs

In China, there is a gong chime called a yun-lo, or "cloud gong." It is a lattice frame with ten different small gongs suspended within it.



Gong

Xylophone

The Indonesian gamelan orchestras often feature a xylophone called a gambang. In Java, gambangs are made of wood, and in Bali, they are made of bamboo.

In the small West African nation of Gambia, musicians play a xylophone with resonators made from gourds. It is called a balo or balafon.

In Uganda, the people play a great big xylophone made from big pieces of wood laid across banana tree trunks, or sometimes across big bundles of straw. This instrument is called an akadinda. It is

often played by several players at once.

And... an interesting percussion instrument is made from a turtle shell by Indians in the Andean region of Colombia. A piece of resin is fastened to one end of a turtle shell and then is vigorously rubbed. This makes a sound that is amplified by the curve of the turtle shell.

The yodelers in Switzerland sometimes accompany their singing by shaking enormous cowbells!

Harp



Harp

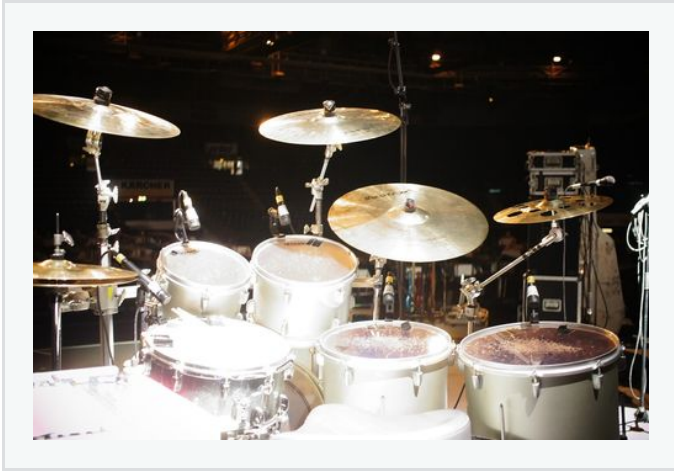
The Mandinka people of Gambia, a tiny West African nation, play a large arched harp called a balon.

In ancient times, the balon was an instrument of war, but now it is used mostly to accompany singing.

In the former Soviet republic of Georgia, now a free state, there is a small angle harp called a changui. It is one of the oldest surviving string instruments, and it has from six to nine strings.

Cymbals

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.



Cymbals

Cymbals, large metal plates that are played by being struck together or with a mallet, may have originated in China or in Turkey. They are mentioned in historical accounts as early as 1200 B.C., and they are often brought up in the Bible, especially in the Psalms.

Gongs are circular metal plaques played with mallets and can have either definite or indefinite pitch.

It is not known where they originated, but the name "gong" is Javanese. Orchestral gongs are often

called by their Chinese name, tam-tam.

Piano

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.



Piano

The piano took the harpsichord's place as the dominant keyboard instrument of the Romantic era. It was originally called pianoforte because, unlike the harpsichord, the player could control its loudness and softness with the amount of pressure applied to the keyboard. The mechanism involves small padded hammers that strike the strings when a key is struck. The first pianos began being built as early as the 1720s, and J.S. Bach is known to have tried playing one.

Since the Romantic era, the piano has been wildly popular as a solo instrument. But sometimes composers write orchestral parts for the instrument, too. Two good examples are in Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* and Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*.

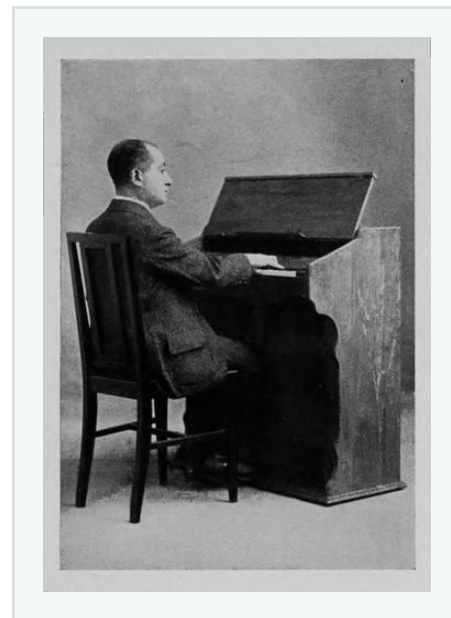
Celesta

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.

The celesta is a keyboard instrument, which is a part-time member of the orchestra. It is used on special occasions only.

The celesta is a small set of tuned orchestral bells with a keyboard mechanism, and its sound is heavenly, like its name indicates.

Tchaikovsky wrote a famous celesta part in *The Nutcracker*, in the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.



a man playing the celesta

Harp

This text is provided courtesy of the New York Philharmonic.



Harp

The harp is the only plucked-string instrument standard to the orchestra. Harps go back many thousands of years. Ancient Middle Eastern paintings show harps being played 2500 years before the Christian era. You can always identify King David in paintings and books because he was known to play the harp.

Small harps have been used by bards, minstrels and troubadors for many hundreds of years, because they are easy and portable. It was in the

Renaissance in Europe that big floor harps began to

be used in ensemble music. The hard part with harps was to make them so they could play in any key. They usually had only "white keys", and had to be retuned constantly. For a while, harps were built with two and three rows of strings, which made them quite hard to play.

It was in 1782, in France, that the "double-action harp" was invented. This innovation allowed the player to raise and lower the pitch of the strings using pedals. And it was from this method that the modern double-action pedal harp evolved. By the mid-1800s, there were so many double-action harps that Western composers were able to write orchestral parts for the harp. Tchaikovsky and Debussy wrote some of the loveliest harp parts.