

Percussion Instruments

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It is not easy to be a percussionist because it takes a lot of practice to hit an instrument with the right amount of strength, in the right place and at the right time.

Every time that I visited Mellieħa before eventually moving here, I would talk with the bandmaster and say, “wouldn’t it be nice if...” and then we’d talk longingly about percussion instruments that were a necessity for many bands in the UK and that would make such a difference to the Imperial Band. Fortunately, thanks to EU funding and a lot of hard work by members of the club, we were able to purchase some good quality instruments. These, together with my own instruments which have found a new home at the band club, provide us with a selection of percussion instruments that is the envy of many. Our percussion students really do appreciate having such a range of quality instruments to play. So that you, too, can appreciate the lovely instruments that we have, here is a brief guide to the instruments that we have, and still need!

Firstly, what is a percussion instrument and how many types are there? The Oregon Symphony Orchestra webpage provides this useful information: ‘Percussion instruments include any instrument that makes a sound when it is hit, shaken, or scraped. Some percussion instruments are tuned and can sound different notes, and some are untuned with no definite pitch. Percussion instruments keep



the rhythm, make special sounds and add excitement and colour. Unlike most of the other players in a band or orchestra, a percussionist will usually play many different instruments in one piece of music.’ This is a good starting point, but you will find instruments in our section which produce their sounds in other ways, too.

Over a hundred years ago, two gentlemen - Erich Moritz von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs – published a musical instrument classification system, which works in the same way as the Dewey decimal system does in libraries. This means that even the Żafzafa, Bedbut, Żummara, Flejguta, Żaqq, and Qarn are classified; the Żummara is to be found with kazoos at 242 and the Żafzafa is a friction membranophone classification 231.11!

How does this system work? Instruments were classified into four sections: idiophones, membranophones, chordophones, and aerophones. Idiophones produce the sound by means of the actual body of the instrument vibrating, whereas membranophones have membranes, chordophones have strings, and aerophones are blown. By the time the classification was translated into English, a fifth classification for electronic instruments had been added. Percussion instruments have members which belong to all these families and even two that belong to the plasmaphone family. Plasmaphones include pyrophones – instruments in which fire is involved! The most famous is the cannon in Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, but this year we can add fireworks to that list: make sure you witness the performance of *Playing with Fire* which concludes our Festa programme!

In our band room we have 3 timpani, 2 bass drums, 2 snare drums, a drum kit, suspended and clash cymbals, tubular bells¹ (chimes), 2 glockenspiels⁴ (bells), a mark tree and bell tree, xylophone⁵, a guiro,

assorted triangles, tambourines, tam-tam², various shakers, castanets, a brake drum³, agogo, cabasa, a whip, rainstick, bongos, granite blocks, a wood block, sleigh bells, and toys. Toys⁶ are the lovely special effects that you will surely

remember from cartoons: duck calls, football rattles, bicycle bells, sirens, vibraslap, flexatone, Swanee whistles, samba whistles, police whistles, train & tugboat whistles, a stadium hooter and so on.

Why are percussion instruments important? Gone are the days (for most of us!) when a band simply played marches, or even extended pieces like Eric Ball's *Resurgam*, which only require a single player on drum kit, or three players on snare drum, bass drum and cymbals if marching. These pieces are still enjoyable, but there is a whole new world of music from films, television, video



games, and musicals, not to mention new pieces written especially for the modern band. Percussion instruments not only provide rhythm, but also add colour, sparkle, excitement, drama, and humour.

The eagle-eyed will see a couple of sandpaper blocks on the toy table. Strictly, these are actually concussion instruments. Percussion generally refers to a percussion instrument which is beaten with a hand or with a dissimilar, non-sounding beater, as opposed to a *concussion idiophone* which is beaten against a second similar instrument. So, we can also include castanets, claves, finger cymbals and so on.

Finally, sticks⁷. Or are they beaters, mallets, tipplers, brushes, hot rods, rutes? The picture at the very start of this article shows three stick bags which, from left to right, are timpani sticks, tuned percussion mallets, and drum sticks. Above, we have triangle beaters. Most percussionists are not too precious about the taxonomy of 'hitty things'. As the advert goes, when regular *sticks* are too loud and brushes are too soft, *Hot Rods* are just right. Hot rods are bundles of thin dowel, frequently birch, bound together. In an orchestra, a hot rod is a rute. If you are a bodhran player, you use a tippler. Tuned percussion such as xylophone, glockenspiel, and vibraphone are called mallet percussion. Don't worry what it's called; as I said to begin with, it is more important to hit an instrument with the right amount of strength, in the right place and at the right time.



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