



Percussion Tips and Tricks



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A Teachers Guide

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Our Underestimated Friend – The Triangle



The Triangle is probably the most underestimated instrument in the orchestra. To play a triangle well takes a great deal of skill.

To make a clear sound on the Triangle make sure that:

- a) the Triangle is suspended correctly with a string
- b) you have a correct Triangle beater

Getting the string correct, and not losing them is one of the most important things in a classroom! Strings will get lost very easily if thrown into a box with other percussion.

Tricks are either to:

- 1) Buy a triangle with a attached string – it has a hole in it and a “fishing wire” type string permanently attached.
- 2) Organize a special “string box” plastic container to go into the box where you keep the triangles.

The instrument that isn't called the Tapping sticks



**That's right, they are called the *Clave!*
(Pronounced CLAH – VEY)**

The Clave are a very important instrument in Latin American music. The word is not only the name of the instrument, but also the name of the rhythm that they play. The word "Clave" literally means "key" – and the pattern they play is the key to the rhythm, which holds the music together.

In a classroom of course you can call them the Tapping Sticks if you wish, however it is an interesting piece of trivia to realize where they come from and how to play them.

To play them correctly you should cup one hand and lay the clave in it very loosely – it should not be "gripped" at all, because it will muffle or mute the sound. The hand should be functioning like a resonating chamber, allowing the wood to vibrate and the sound to be louder.

Did you know that clave are actually not a pair? – In a professional pair the one in the resonating hand is usually slightly heavier and thicker. Of course in a classroom it is simpler to use matched pairs, however communicating the fact that one is held in the hand, and played on the top with the other one is the most important thing, and that they not be played just by hitting together.

The many undiscovered tricks of the Tambourine



The Tambourine is available in two types – the “Orchestral” or Tambourine with skin, and the “Rock” or skinless Tambourine.

These two types of Tambourine are used for different applications and are played quite differently.

If playing a classical or symphonic band piece, it would be normal to use a headed Tambourine. This enables special tricks such as intricate rhythms to be played with the fingers and “thumb rolls”.

A thumb roll is simply a friction roll between the thumb and the skin, causing the jingles to vibrate. All you have to do is moisten your thumb a little, and then slide it along the skin, just near the edge. This may not be possible on every tambourine, but it is a clever trick to be able to show children!

Orchestral or skinned tambourines should be held flat parallel to the ground. This means that an intricate rhythm can be played and the jingles will behave as you expect. If the classical Tambourine is held perpendicularly to the ground then the jingles will not give a clear rhythm or beat. The classical tambourine is normally held in the left hand, so that the right hand is free to play the rhythm on it.

The Rock tambourine however should be held perpendicular to the ground, and shaken from side to side, hitting the other hand for accents. It is normally held in the right hand (or whatever hand is strongest, as it has to do a lot of work!)

Do you know the ancient mystery of the Castanets?



The Castanets are an ancient instrument, having been used for years for dancing throughout Europe and the middle east.

True traditional castanets are held in the back of the hand, and the string is attached around the hand. The flamenco dancer would have one pair in each hand, and play complex rhythms using both of them.



It is more normal these days to have either small hand held plastic or wooden castanets, and the string does not need to be attached to the hand in any way. Instead it has elastic to give the Castanets some spring.



In orchestras you would normally have a castanet "machine" which is where two castanets are mounted on a block of wood, with springs so that they can be played precisely by one player.

It is important to choose the correct type of castanet for the correct application. Young children's classes should have small plastic or wooden hand held Castanets with elastic strings, and for a Concert Band or Orchestra a Castanet "machine" is the ideal.

The instrument that gave Peter Allen his name



The Maracas

The maracas are not difficult to play, but it is important to learn a few skills.

Firstly, think of the content of the maraca as the sound producing device – it hitting the inside wall of the maraca is what makes the sound. Therefore we need to imagine this material moving back and forward from one wall to the other with maximum ease.

For this reason maracas must be held up vertically, and not played horizontally to the ground, as gravity will be working against getting a clean & even sound.

Young children are better to have only one maraca, and play it into their hand for a definite beat until they are more confident.

For older students you can try two in one hand, like the picture above for one technique of playing. One maraca in each hand is still used sometimes – it depends on the music that is being played.

Other shakers

Many types of shakers exist – the correct term for a tubular type shaker is *chocallo*.



The correct way to play this type of shaker is the same as a maraca. It should be held parallel to the ground so that the “shot” inside it moves back and forth in an even way.

What on earth is that thing with the beads around it?



It's called a Cabasa!

The Cabasa evolved from the African tradition of draping beads around a hollowed out gourd (a type of pumpkin), giving a special effect when tapped or shaken.

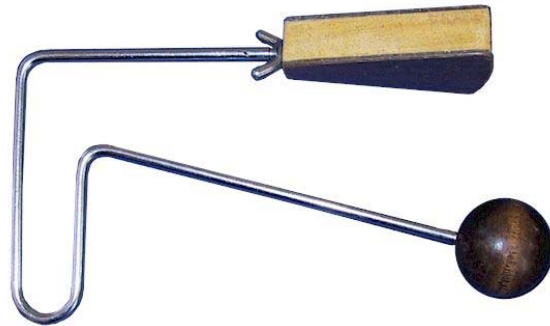
Schools commonly have metal ones, consisting of strings of metal beads, around a grooved metal cylinder.

The Cabasa can be played like a shaker or maraca, just letting the outside beads hit the walls.

You can also hold it in your hand and turn it from side to side, creating long and short sounds.

It can be used to tastefully add effects to ballad tunes, however its usefulness in a school situation is limited.

A Vibra what?



The Vibra-slap

The vibraslap is one of the most interesting of percussion instruments. It's a modern invention which was created to add an extra sound effect.

The traditional instrument which it replaced was a "quijada" – which was a jawbone of a horse! It was discovered that if you picked up a jawbone of a dead horse and hit it on the nose then the teeth rattled, creating a unique and interesting sound.

The vibraslap was designed as a replacement for this delicate and unusual instrument!



It is played by holding the metal frame and hitting the ball with the other hand. The vibrations go through the metal frame and make the loose metal rods in the sound box vibrate against the wood.

It can be heard in numerous recordings and in sound effects.

Whats that fish doing in my classroom?



Its called a Guiro
(Pronounced Gweer – oh)

Old fashioned guiros were all designed in the shape of a fish, however these days they come in many shapes and sizes.

The first guiros were made from gourds (large, inedible pumpkins) They have grooves down the side, and holes underneath for holding.

Hold the guiro in the left hand, so that the right hand (or whichever is strongest) can do the playing.

Tips – the stick should be **thin**. The thinner the better – as a thick stick will give a very muffled tone as it will not get in the grooves.

The other factor is the length of the stick, and how close your hand is to the guiro – try experimenting with this to vary the sound.

All notes on the guiro should be scraped, but longer ones should be given more emphasis.

Wake me up before you Ago-go!



Ago-go bells are metal cowbells that are attached to a metal rod. They are normally associated with Brazilian music, particularly the samba.

The metal rod holding them is held in the hand, and the bells are parallel to the ground, so that they can both be played on the top. They are best played with a thin wooden stick.

Cowbells.



Cowbells come in a great many shapes and sizes – they can be held in the hand or sometimes attached to a post for a drum set or timbales.

If playing in the hand then use the hand to muffle the bell a little, so that the overtones do not interfere with the music.

Hit on the open edge of the cowbell for the strongest, cleanest sound.

A thick drumstick is the ideal hitting implement for the Cowbell.

Bongo, Congo, Schmongo.. what are all those drums?



Bongo drums are the small drums



Conga drums are the deep drums

And there is no instrument called the congo drums!

Bongos are played using just the fingers – Congas are played using the whole hand.

Both Congas and Bongos are hand drums, and they should not be played with sticks.

Bongos should ideally have a stand, as they won't resonate if they are placed on the floor. The traditional way is to hold them between the knees, but this is very difficult for school students.

Congas should always have a stand and are played with a mixture of hand techniques.

- The 'Open Tone' where the drum is hit with the fingers and top part of the palm
- The 'Bass Tone' where the drum is hit with the whole hand in the middle
- The 'Slap Tone' where the drum is hit near the edge, with the fingers cupped.